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HIS GRACE

VOL. I.

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HIS GRACE

BY

W. E. NORRIS

AUTHOR OF "MDLE. DE MERSAC," "THE ROGUE,"
"MARCIA," "JACK'S FATHER," ETC.

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HIS GRACE

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CHAPTER I.

THE SACKED SOLICITOR.

IN the month of May, 1887, at which time, as will be remembered, preparations were being made for the fit celebrating of the Jubilee of our most gracious Sovereign Lady Queen Victoria, I, Philip Martyn, was in a frame of mind very far removed from being jubilant. I don't mean to say that I am, or was, one whit less loyal than other people—on the contrary, I am one of those quiet, law-abiding persons who are bound to be loyal to the form of government under which they live, and, notwithstanding my devotion to the House of Hanover, everything leads me to believe that, had a British Republic been proclaimed before the date of my birth, I should have been

unreservedly loyal to that—but I suppose that with the generality of us, our personal affairs and interests occupy a somewhat larger share of our attention than those of the nation at large, and the truth is that, on the particular afternoon to which I allude, I had clean forgotten the circumstances of Her Majesty's having reigned over us with honour and distinction for half a century. My personal affairs and interests were just then in a parlous state; neither honour nor distinction had I achieved; nor, so far as I could foresee, was there the slightest prospect that, in my case, diligence and conscientious effort would ever be crowned by those rewards.

“The long and short of it, Philip,” my Uncle John said to me, as I helped him to struggle into his overcoat before he left the office, “is, that you are not fitted to take a leading part in a business like ours. Understand me, I am not blaming you; I am merely stating a fact. There are men who are born to be lawyers, and there are other men who, I presume, were born to be something else; though, if you'll excuse my saying so, I'll be hanged if I can lay my

finger upon the especial purpose for which you were created. What I do know, and what it is better and kinder to tell you at once, is that you were not created to be a solicitor. I have had some experience of you by this time, and I think it only fair to warn you, that you may stay here until your hair is grey without much hope of being taken into partnership. I am sorry for it; but necessity has no law, and the law has no necessities, except those imposed by Act of Parliament, or by contracts duly signed and attested. Not being an idiot, I never contracted to make you a member of my firm; although I am, of course, aware that that was what you and your mother looked forward to, when I advised that you should pass your examinations, and promised to find employment for you in the office. Personally, I should have been only too pleased to give you every encouragement; it is no fault of mine, and, I daresay, it is no fault of yours either that I am unable to do so. You lack the requisite abilities, that's all. I am not making any complaint, mind you; only, if I were in your place, I should

drop the law and try to discover my real mission in life. As I said before, I am not clever enough to assist you in your researches; still, the odds are that you *have* a mission of one kind or another, because it seems scarcely reasonable to conclude that you can have been sent into an overcrowded world without any individual capacity for usefulness whatsoever."

It was not often that my uncle treated me to so prolonged a harangue; nor, I am sure, would he have done so then, had he not been very much in earnest, and rather angry, into the bargain. He had some excuses for being angry, with which it is needless to trouble the reader; he was perfectly justified in intimating that I was not cut out to adorn a profession which I have always abhorred; his advice, that I should abandon it and seek some other field of enterprise would have been admirable, if I had possessed ever so small a private income upon which to subsist, while awaiting better things. But unhappily I had nothing beyond what my mother was able to spare me out of her own straitened means; and that was why I was a sorrowful

man as I wended my way westwards after office hours.

When I sat down to write this narrative, I made up my mind that I would say as little as possible about myself; because, in the course of it, I shall only appear as what I actually am, a practical nonentity, whose disappearance at any moment from these earthly scenes would cause no appreciable inconvenience to anybody. But the difficulty of speaking in the first person when one is neither a hero nor anything resembling one, is somewhat greater than I thought it was going to be; and it seems almost necessary, for the purpose of clearness, that I should start by being a little egotistical. I must just mention that my father had been a wealthy merchant, who had failed in business late in life, and had died shortly afterwards, leaving his widow and his two children with only a few hundreds a year wherewith to engage upon the struggle for existence. I must add that I, who had been originally intended for the Guards, was compelled, by force of circumstances, to accept Uncle John's suggestions with gratitude; and I

suppose I had better also confess, without more ado, that I had a certain facility for the composition of poetry. Nobody, I am sure, will be so unkind as to grudge me the privilege of calling my compositions poetry, because nobody who reads these lines is in the very least likely to have ever perused my poems. They have been published; but my publisher assures me, and I can well believe him, that they have at no time had a wide circulation. At that time, however, it did not seem to me an impossible thing that the public might eventually recognise some merits in my attempts at versification, and even go so far as to pay me for the same; so that, on my way from the city to St James's Street, I asked myself quite seriously whether it was not my probable mission in life to be a poet in a humble fashion. I have since discovered that my mission in life is essentially prosaic. One makes these discoveries in the course of a year or two, and they are doubtless salutary, if they are not precisely agreeable.

The first thing that I saw, after reaching my club and picking up one of the evening papers,

was that the Duke of Hurstbourne was dead. The announcement interested me, and served to divert my thoughts for the moment from personal perplexities; because, although I had never seen the deceased nobleman, and although, as the newspaper obligingly informed its readers, he had not been in any sense a prominent personage, I remembered that my old schoolfellow Arthur Gascoigne had been his nephew and his heir-presumptive. The presumption had now been converted into a reality; the small boy who had been my fag not so very long before, who had basked in my smiles and trembled at my frown, was a full-blown duke, while I was but a budding solicitor, not to say a solicitor who had been frostily nipped in the bud. Such are the revenges of time, and such the inequalities of human existence. However, I was not so shabby as to grudge Gascoigne his promotion. We can't all of us be dukes, and he had always been such a good little fellow, that I had no doubt as to his eventually proving quite as presentable a duke as the rest of his compeers. I had not seen much of him since old Eton days, our paths

in life having naturally been so divergent ; still we had come across one another every now and again, and he had always seemed glad to see me and chat over bygone times. I was glad to think that all this honour and wealth had come to him, because I suspected from what I had heard that he had become a somewhat extravagant young gentleman, and I knew that he was not rich.

While I was holding the unread newspaper in my hand and meditating philosophically over the tremendous issues involved in a system of hereditary succession, I was accosted by another member of the club who was also a former schoolfellow of mine, and who said,—

“So old Hurstbourne has been gathered to his fathers at last, I see. Luck for little Gascoigne, isn't it? Though I suppose he'll get nothing except the title and the entailed estates, and what they're worth nobody seems to know.”

“Why won't he get anything more?” I inquired.

“Oh, because his uncle wouldn't have anything to do with him. Never saw him, in fact, I believe. There was a deadly feud between his father, Lord

Charles, and the head of the family. What it was about I can't say; but they didn't speak, and when Lord Charles died, the Duke, who, as you know, lived and died a bachelor, rather ostentatiously took up Paul Gascoigne, Arthur's cousin. I expect he has left the whole of the London property, which is worth any amount of money, to Paul. Still, Arthur ought to do middling well with the estates which are bound to be his, and most likely his mother will manage to pick up an heiress for him to marry. Ever meet Lady Charles?"

I had not that advantage, and I said so.

"Queer old girl," resumed my well-informed friend, with an amused smile. "Not a bad old sort, in her way, though she isn't exactly the sort of mother whom I should covet personally. As she isn't one's mother, one only laughs, don't you know; but if she were one's mother, I dare say one might writhe occasionally. Arthur does not writhe. He's such a good-hearted little beggar that he couldn't for the life of him see a fault in anybody whom he was fond of; and, after all, he's quite right to be fond of her, for she adores him and thinks nothing good enough for him.

She was an heiress herself once upon a time ; but that old rip Lord Charles made ducks and drakes of her fortune, they say. Anyhow, she has been pretty hard-up of late years. It's rather a joke, only, of course, as you don't know her, you can't see the joke, that in a few months' time Lady Charles will be doing the honours at Hurstbourne Castle."

He had a good deal more to say about the late Duke of Hurstbourne, who, it appeared, had been an individual of eccentric and retiring disposition, as well as about the quarrels and peculiarities of the Gascoigne family in general ; but I did not listen very attentively to his prattle. I had family affairs of my own to think about, which, if less interesting to him and to the world at large than those of a duke, were far more so to me, and it did not seem likely that I should have any further personal relations with the newly elevated member of the highest rank in the peerage. I remember that, while he was talking, I felt vaguely sorry that circumstances should have rendered me such a complete outcast from high society—not because

I cared for high society, of which I had little knowledge or experience, but because I cared a good deal for Arthur Gascoigne.

Nowadays, I sometimes wonder what can have made me care for him at a time when, after all, I was but slightly acquainted with him. He himself declares that it must have been my immense superiority to him in the matter of physical size and strength; for, indeed, I am a big, muscular man, whereas he is a diminutive and not very powerful one, though Heaven knows he has the pluck of a whole regiment!

"My dear Martyn," says he,—I don't mind repeating this, because there isn't a word of truth in it—"it is your nature to think of anybody and everybody in the world before you think of yourself; and as nothing would induce you to admit that you have twice the brains of other people, you are driven to place your biceps at their service. It stands to reason that a poor, unprotected pigmy must have irresistible claims upon you; and that, you may depend upon it, is what made you resolve to be my friend and champion."

All that is very great nonsense. I do not quote it in order to make the reader think me modest and unselfish, but only to convey some idea of the simplicity of Hurstbourne's character. It does not occur to him that he possesses any individual attraction—and in truth, the attraction which he unquestionably does possess would be a little difficult to define—if anyone tries to be a friend to him, he at once assumes that that person must be abnormally noble and generous. Perhaps that is one reason why he continues to the present day to love and admire his mother, who—However, if I have to say anything disparaging about her, I will say it later on.

At the time of which I speak, I naturally took it for granted that the Duke of Hurstbourne must henceforth move in a sphere as remote from my own as that of any duke must of necessity be; yet dukes and beggars do come across one another in the street, and it was in the street that I found myself face to face with my former fag a few days later. The street was muddy, too, after a recent shower, and he

came running across it in his patent-leather boots to shake hands with me; which seems to show that some people may be dukes without realising that it behoves them to beckon their friends through the mud when they wish to speak to them.

"Well, old chap," said he, "how has the world been treating you this last ever so long?"

"Not with the same liberality," I replied, somewhat gloomily, "as it has treated you. I have not lost a wealthy and noble uncle, for the sufficient reason that I have no wealthy or noble uncle to lose. At least, I believe Uncle John is pretty well off; but he is not dead or going to die; and when he does die, nothing can be more certain than that he won't leave me a penny. At present, he is anxious to make it clear to me that I shall not get many pence out of him even while he lives. All the same, I am glad to think that you are more fortunate."

"Oh, well," he answered with a laugh, "I don't expect my old uncle meant me to be any more fortunate than he could help. I haven't an idea at this moment whether I am a rich man or a

pauper; but I shall hear all about it after the funeral to-morrow, I suppose. What's up between you and *your* old man? Not a row, I hope? It's awful cheek for me to offer you advice; but really, my dear old Martyn, I wouldn't quarrel with him if I were you. When all's said and done, he has it in his power to make you or mar you—hasn't he now?"

That was Hurstbourne all over. People who think that they know him, but who are in reality far too stupid to be even remotely conscious of their own stupidity, are wont to describe him as an excitable, scatter-brained, pleasure-loving sort of fellow, and to assume as a matter of course that, because he likes amusing himself, his personal amusement must invariably occupy the foremost place in his thoughts. How many of them, I wonder, if they had just succeeded to a dukedom, and were absolutely in the dark as to whether their strawberry-leaves had brought them immense wealth or comparative poverty, would deem the fortunes or misfortunes of a humble lawyer worthy of their attention? Yet I verily believe that Hurstbourne, after I had told him something of

the troubles and perplexities to which I was a prey, was a good deal more anxious about my prospects than he was about his own.

“Well, we must get you out of that beastly office somehow,” he said at length; “there’s no good sticking to work that you hate—especially after the old boy has given you such a broad hint to retire. I wonder whether I couldn’t get some sort of appointment for you—a county-court judgeship, don’t you know, or something. I’m afraid I’m not going to be a very big man; still, the title ought to carry a certain amount of influence with it. Anyhow, Lord Chancellors and people of that kind would be pretty sure to receive me civilly if I went and looked them up, eh?”

I thought it quite likely that the Lord Chancellor would be civil to the Duke of Hurstbourne, and it seemed hardly worth while to explain that I was not eligible for a county-court judgeship. Few, indeed, are the appointments which in these democratic days can be bestowed, without questions asked, upon the nominee of a duke, even though that duke should be, as Hurstbourne was,

the head of one of the old and formerly powerful Whig families, and I had common sense enough to be aware that, if I was ever to earn my own bread and butter, I should have to do so by my own exertions. However, I did not wish to distress my kind-hearted little would-be benefactor by throwing doubts upon his ability to help me, and when we parted he clapped me on the shoulder (he had to stand on tiptoe to do it), saying cheerily,—

“Don’t you be down on your luck, old man; it will be all right. Just wait a bit until I’ve had time to get into the saddle, and you’ll see that I sha’n’t forget you.”

As I afterwards found out, he really did not forget me during the three or four ensuing weeks, although I am afraid I must confess that I forgot him; at all events, I did not think of him much or often. I did chance to hear, through the newspapers and from private sources, what his inheritance amounted to, and a very fine inheritance it sounded, notwithstanding the somewhat ungenerous will of the late duke, who, as had been anticipated, was found to have bequeathed

the entire London property as well as a goodly portion of his northern estates to Mr Paul Gascoigne. However, my young friend got Hurstbourne Castle, together with the lands appertaining thereto, which were estimated to bring in an income sufficient (as it appeared to me) for the maintenance of a magnate of the first water. I saw no reason to pity him; and as I had at the moment many and great reasons for pitying myself, I relegated him to one of those back shelves in my memory which I do not generally examine except when I can't sleep at night.

I suppose Uncle John must have wanted very much indeed to get rid of me, and, all things considered, I can't say that I wonder at it; but I still think that he might have attained his object without being so emphatically disagreeable, and so disagreeably emphatic. Perhaps it is easier to forgive great injuries than small ones; perhaps it would not be true to say that my uncle ever inflicted any real injury, great or small, upon me; yet even now, when I am independent of him, and cherish no grudge against him, I cannot recall the sharp speeches which

he used to address to me in those days without feeling the blood mount into my cheeks and my eyes. I only remained on at the office day after day because it was necessary, and because I could not, for the sake of asserting my personal dignity, throw the weight of supporting my great useless body upon my poor old mother's already over-burdened hands. I suppose Uncle John knew that, and it may be that he allowed a more free rein to his tongue in consequence. Well, it is all over, and it doesn't matter, and I admit that he is a very decent sort of man, as men go; only, of course, my forbearance was exercised to little purpose, for when once that kind of thing begins the sooner the inevitable end comes the better.

In my case it came one afternoon when my uncle told me before all his clerks that I understood rather less of my business than the first crossing-sweeper whom he could pick up in the street. He had said worse things than that to me before; but he had not said them in so public a manner, and it seemed to me that, under the circumstances, the only possible course open

to me was that which I made haste to adopt. Shortly afterwards I walked away from the city a free man, and a practically penniless one.

I was making for the club, and was walking moodily along Piccadilly, when a little man in beautifully-fitting black clothes — never in his life has Hurstbourne had a wrinkle about his person from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot — caught me by the arm, exclaiming,—

“Here’s luck! You’re the very man I wanted to meet. Come and dine with me at the Clarence at eight o’clock, like a good fellow, will you? I’m in a deuce of a hurry now; but I’ve got something to say to you, and I’ll say it this evening, if you’ll come. Are you disengaged?”

I was disengaged, and, perhaps, not disinclined to confide my woes to a sympathetic listener; so when, about twenty minutes after the appointed hour, he arrived at the very smart and modern club which he had named, he found me waiting for him there. He did not apologise for being late; but he apologised presently for the dinner and the wine, neither of which stood in need

of any apology, and then he proceeded to apologise also for a proposal which he wished to make to me.

"I daresay," he began, in deprecating accents, "it isn't exactly what you would choose; but it's better than nothing, and it needn't be permanent unless you like. The fact is, that I have been talking to some of these big—wigs, and they all assure me that they can't do anything for a solicitor. Barristers, they say, they might be able to help, but I expect that's only because I wasn't asking them to help a barrister. Well, to cut a long story short, what I want you to do, if you will, is to manage my establishment and my expenditure for me. It's very evident to me that somebody must do it, or I shall soon get things into a rare mess. There's a land-steward and a house-steward and a lot of other rascals; but unless they have a gentleman over them to keep them up to their bearings, they'll rob me right and left; and as soon as I realised this I made so bold as to think of you, Martyn. I really don't believe you would find it such a bad berth. You would live at

Hurstbourne and have your own rooms, as many of 'em as you wanted, and there would be horses for you to ride, and, of course, the shooting. I can't help thinking that a country life would suit an athletic fellow like you better than office work in this filthy town; besides which you would have the comfort, which I know would be a very real comfort to you, of thinking that you were doing me the greatest possible service. I've no head for figures, you see, and my only chance of averting an appalling financial disaster is to commit my affairs to some one whom I can thoroughly trust."

He went into a few details which certainly seemed to bear out his assertion that he was not very well qualified to take care of himself in a financial sense; he explained what my duties would be, and I did not think them beyond the range of my capacities; finally he named a salary so preposterously high that I could not in common honesty accept it. But I did, after some hesitation, accept the post offered to me. I knew very well that it was offered out of the kindness and generosity of his heart,

and that, if I did not take it, the appointment would probably not be filled by any one else; still I hope I was not absolutely and entirely selfish in the matter. Looking back upon it, I am able to say, with a clear conscience, that I have been of some service to him and have earned my pay. Even at the moment I might, perhaps, have resisted the temptation, powerful as it was, had I not foreseen that he would at least not be a loser by employing me.

He was so pleased by my consent to let him relieve me of the cares which had almost broken my heart, that he jumped up from his chair to shake hands with me, knocking over a decanter and scandalising the prim waiter, who, no doubt, thought that he had drunk more wine than was good for him.

“My dear old chap,” he exclaimed, “this it awfully good of you, and I don’t know how to thank you enough! My mother will be delighted when she hears of it; for she knows, if anybody does, that I am the worst hand in the world at keeping accounts. We really ought to have another bottle of fizz to celebrate this joyful

occasion. Waiter, bring another bottle of that stuff which they have the cheek to call '74 Giessler."

As I am a Christian man, I left that club perfectly sober, yet perfectly convinced that I had behaved like a friend in need. And indeed I believe that such is the impression which my poor, dear Hurstbourne invariably manages to convey to those whom he has befriended.

CHAPTER II.

NORA.

THE next morning I had a second interview with Hurstbourne, in the course of which my duties and responsibilities were somewhat more clearly defined for me than they had been on the previous evening. I was, it appeared, to be invested with plenary powers as regarded the management of the Hurstbourne Castle estate and establishment. I was to "get things straight," if I could; I was to effect any reductions which might have to be effected; above all, I was entreated not to let my young friend spend more money than he possessed.

"Because," said he ingenuously, "I know very well that that's what I shall do, unless you ride me in a rather sharp bit. I never could see such an awful lot of difference between a sovereign and a shilling, and I don't suppose I ever shall.

But if you'll have the kindness just to take a good, strong pull at me when you think I'm getting my head up too much, it'll be all right. I don't want to be bothered about five-pound notes, you understand; but, at the same time, I don't want to come a cropper."

What he precisely did want was not easy to ascertain, nor, I suppose, were his own ideas particularly distinct as yet; only he had a very decided and not very unnatural desire to get all the fun that he could for his money, and I gathered that, what with yachting, deerstalking, and the claims of London society, he would not spend more than three or four months of the year at his ancestral castle.

"When I am at Hurstbourne, though, I shall make it lively for you," he added encouragingly; "and when you're alone—well, you'll have the neighbours, and I daresay there will be work enough to keep you busy for a few hours every day, and in the winter you ought to get plenty of sport. Anyhow, you can but give the plan a trial, and drop it if it doesn't suit you."

The plan was quite certain to suit me better

than any other that could have been devised on my behalf, and I am sure he knew that, or he would never have asked me to undertake it. I said as much to him when we parted; but he scouted the idea of my having anything to thank him for, protesting loudly that the obligation was all the other way. So, as there was not much more to be said, and as he apparently had a great many engagements, I left him, promising to let him hear from me as soon as I should have taken up my abode at Hurstbourne Castle, and the same afternoon I journeyed down to Essex, in order to inform my mother of the change which had occurred in my fortunes.

My mother, I should mention, still lived in the neighbourhood where we had been accustomed to reign supreme in the days of our prosperity. When the crash came, and when my father, by good luck, had found an immediate purchaser for Fern Hill in Lady Deverell, we had gone up to London for a time; but after his death, my mother, having no ties elsewhere, had thought it best to return to the old country, and there she and my sister Nora dwelt in a modest cottage,

not more than a mile from what had formerly been our own park gates. It sounds like a rather painful arrangement, and perhaps it was so to Nora; but I don't think my mother felt it much. The truth is that, after our great misfortune, she never felt anything very much. All the same, there could be no doubt but that the news of my rupture with Uncle John would cause her pain and anxiety; so that I was very thankful to be able to couple this announcement with another to the effect that I had obtained at least temporary employment of a much more remunerative character.

I found her seated in the little, shabbily-furnished drawing-room, and very frail and old and ill she looked; though she summoned up a smile to welcome me, and did her best to disguise what was so evident, that she was in mortal terror lest this unexpected arrival of mine should portend some fresh calamity. There are people whom it makes one's heart ache to see deprived of the luxuries which seem to be their birthright—people upon whom comparative indigence entails as much actual suffering as positive want does upon those

of more robust temperament—and my poor mother was one of these. She had been brought up in cotton-wool; she had always been delicate and had always been assiduously taken care of; never until her old age had she known what it was to lack every comfort that money could buy. It was a perpetual miracle to me that she had had the physical strength to survive the successive blows which had shattered her small world into fragments. As for her uncomplaining courage, I did not wonder so much at that; for she was well-born, and that she should do her duty to the best of her ability was no more than was to be expected of her.

The tiny white hands that held her knitting-pins trembled while I unfolded my tale, and so did the grey curls which have been arranged after the same fashion on either side of her thin face since the year 1840 or thereabouts; for I am a clumsy, methodical fellow, and I can't unfold my tale unless I begin at the beginning; but she did not interrupt me, and she heaved a long sigh of relief when she heard that, in spite of my ill-advised quarrel with her

brother-in-law, I was not left without the means of earning my subsistence.

“I am sure you know best, Philip,” she said, when I had made an end of speaking, “and I daresay you will be happier at Hurstbourne Castle than you would have been in London; but—isn’t it a rather uncertain sort of prospect?”

Well, of course, it was that; only, as I pointed out to her, Uncle John had offered me no prospect at all, except that of being assisted out into the street, if I did not adopt the more dignified plan of stepping over the threshold of my own accord. She was easily reassured. She had lost the power of looking far ahead; probably also she thought, what ought to be quite true, that an able-bodied man is never in any real danger of starving. Naturally enough she was less confident with regard to my sister’s future, and I was not surprised when she presently appealed to me to say what was to become of a girl who had been educated as a lady (and was consequently quite incompetent to educate others) in the event of her being left alone and

penniless in the world. What, indeed! My mother had put this question to me many a time before, and never had I been able to make any satisfactory reply.

"Let us hope that she will marry," said I; for I could hit upon nothing more original or more comforting to say.

"Yes," assented my mother; "that is what we must hope for; and even if she should not make such a marriage as we might have thought desirable in old days, we must still be thankful that she has found a home. This afternoon she has gone over to Fern Hill to see Lady Deverell, who has been most kind to her. Lady Deverell is really a good, kind woman."

My mother said this as if she rather expected to be contradicted, and, as a matter of fact, I did not altogether agree with her; but, not wishing to be argumentative, I thought it would save time to inquire at once whether Lady Deverell had selected a husband for Nora. I obtained no reply; for at this moment my mother dropped her ball of wool, which she begged me to pick up for her, saying that the

housemaid always made a point of entangling her legs in it when it was left on the floor; and before I was off my knees, Nora herself had come in.

As my sister Nora is one of the personages chiefly concerned in the simple narrative which I have undertaken to relate, I should be glad, if I could, to convey some accurate impression of her; but my own impression of her is, I suppose, a good deal coloured by fraternal partiality, and it may very well be that she did not appear such a strikingly pretty girl to everybody as she always appeared to me. Still, I do think that almost everybody would have admitted the fact of her prettiness, if only in virtue of her dark-blue eyes and long curved eyelashes. Such eyes are unquestionably both rare and beautiful, and although the rest of her features may not have been absolutely perfect, she had the advantage of a complexion above all criticism. Beauty, as we all know, admits of no closer definition than something at which we find pleasure in gazing; and I have reason to believe that I am by no means

the only man who finds pleasure in gazing at my sister.

What seems to show that there must be something wrong about the above definition is, that she found and expressed unbounded pleasure in gazing at me. And yet who can tell? It is not impossible that, in her eyes, my homely countenance may, by reason of her affection for me, have been glorified by some distant suggestion of that comeliness which nature has denied to it. Anyhow, she was as glad to see me as I was to see her.

“But, my dear Phil,” said she, presently, “you might have gone to the expense of a sixpenny telegram before bouncing in upon us like this. If I had only known you were coming, I wouldn’t have promised to dine with Lady Deverell to-night. I’ll tell you what you shall do; you shall come and dine there with me. It isn’t a party, and she won’t at all mind my bringing you; but, to make assurance doubly sure, I’ll write her a line, saying that you are here for twenty-four hours—of course, you can’t have got leave for more than

twenty-four hours—and that I really cannot do without you for a whole evening out of that short time.”

I demurred to this proposition, because Lady Deverell was not exactly the sort of person with whom I felt inclined to take a liberty; but my mother rather eagerly backed Nora up, and the end of it was, that, five minutes later, the boy who cleaned the knives and boots and was supposed to weed the garden was despatched to Fern Hill with a note. He returned before the dressing hour, bearing a scrawl in pencil from Lady Deverell, which Nora handed to me,—“Very happy to see your brother, my dear. Sorry I have no lady for him.”

Poor people, and people who have seen better days, are doubtless apt to detect slights when perhaps none have been intended. I confess that I did not like what seemed to me to be a somewhat studied lack of ceremony on Lady Deverell's part; but then, for the matter of that, I did not like Lady Deverell; and, after all, it was we, and not she, who had begun by being uncereemonious.

At the risk of being suspected of a jealous prejudice against the two people who had done the most good in the parish since our losses had debarred my mother from taking any pecuniary share in works of charity, I will confess that, if we had a neighbour whom I disliked more than Lady Deverell, it was Mr Burgess, our respected Rector; so that I was not overjoyed to find him standing in the well-known drawing-room, with his hands behind his back and his legs wide apart, just as he had been used to stand in the old days when he came to dine with us, and when his manner in addressing us had been so very different. He addressed me now in a tone of kindly patronage, holding out his fat hand, calling me "my young friend," and expressing a hope that I was sticking to work.

"Work—work! Nothing like work for keeping the body and the mind healthy, you may depend upon it," he was pleased to say.

His body was unquestionably, not to say obtrusively, healthy; I cannot answer for the state of his mind; but, in any case, I really

did not think, from what I knew of him, that he could have arrived at that pitch of happy certitude through personal experience of the means recommended. Thirty years ago Mr Burgess would, I imagine, have been a prominent Evangelical; for he was a stout, heavy man, with bushy eyebrows, a long upper lip and a great, foolish nose; living in this later epoch, he had become known as a somewhat advanced High Churchman. He could not possibly make himself look the part, which was a pity; but he had a fine, sonorous voice, and his method of singing the service was admired by some people. Indeed, to be quite fair, I believe there were also some people who admired his sermons. Just now he was entitled to the respectful sympathy of his parishioners, having recently suffered a severe bereavement in the death of his wife, who had left him with the cares of ministering to a large small family upon his hands.

Mr Burgess, it appeared, was the only guest besides ourselves who had been invited to dine, but there were a number of people staying in the house, none of whom struck me as being

particularly interesting. Lady Deverell, who was as rich as she was pious, was given to hospitality; but I imagine that she preferred entertaining those whom she could safely bully—old maids, missionaries at home on leave, and so forth. After dinner she put me through my facings in her usual abrupt, peremptory fashion. Why was I giving up my profession? Didn't I think that, if there was any disagreement between my uncle and myself, the chances were in favour of the older and more experienced man being in the right? Had my management of my own affairs been so successful that I could count with any certainty upon success in managing the affairs of a friend? She drew herself up and looked more forbidding than ever when she heard who my friend was.

"Oh, indeed!" said she, in accents of cold displeasure. "I am not acquainted with the present Duke of Hurstbourne; but if he at all resembles his father, his house is not one in which I should wish to see any son of mine take up his abode."

I was sufficiently irritated to reply that I

had never in my wildest dreams contemplated the honour of calling Lady Deverell my mother as a conceivable state of things, and that a man in my humble position could not, of course, aspire to her exclusiveness. Thereupon, she stared at me for a moment and turned her back. She is a tall gaunt woman, with a beaky nose, rather sunken black eyes and iron-grey hair. I do not think that I have ever been exactly afraid of her; but no doubt I should have been less uncivil to her if she had been less alarming.

Moreover, I was, I must own, in a rather bad temper at the time, having other reasons besides my hostess's impertinence for feeling annoyed. I did not like, and I never had liked, Mr Burgess's manner with my sister. Of course he was old enough to be her father, and he had baptised her and prepared her for confirmation and all that; still, there was something about his ponderous and paternal playfulness in addressing her which had always been offensive to me and which I could not help thinking was displayed to an unusual extent that evening. It would have been as absurd to accuse this elderly clerical

widower of flirtation as to connect any idea of delicate innuendo with a blue-bottle fly; still I was so provoked by the way in which he kept buzzing round Nora that I took her away at the earliest possible moment, on the plea that, as I had to leave home the next morning, I wished to see as much as I could of my family before going to bed. Mr Burgess followed us into the hall and was anxious to drive us home in his pony-chaise; but I firmly declined his proffered courtesy, declaring that, on such a lovely night, we should both of us much prefer to walk home across the fields.

"I can't imagine," said I, as we passed out of the garden into the park together (for in my unreasonable, masculine way I was a little vexed with Nora, as well as with the Rector), "what pleasure you can find in listening to the oily egotism of that old bore."

"Can't you?" she returned, without meeting my eyes. "But—did I say I found any pleasure in it?"

"No; you didn't say so," I admitted; "but really anybody who had watched you with him

to-night might have thought you did. His spirits don't seem to have been much affected by his loss. I suppose the next thing we shall hear will be that he has appointed some worthy successor to the vacant place in his affections."

"Yes," agreed Nora, absently; "I shouldn't wonder."

Unlike Mr Burgess, Nora was evidently out of spirits. She did not listen to what I said; she did not laugh at the time-honoured jokes with which we had been in the habit of diverting one another from our infancy, and which I had never before known to pall upon either of us. It was only when I reminded her of that memorable occasion on which the old cab-horse—a designation conferred by us upon our esteemed pastor in compliment to certain peculiarities of action—had slipped up, while ambling down the chancel, and had seated himself with a resounding crash upon the tiles, displaying the soles of his immense feet to his flock—it was only then, I say, that she roused herself from her abstraction, and suddenly laid her hand upon my arm.

"Phil," said she, "I don't want you to call

Mr Burgess the old cab-horse any more; I don't want you to say anything disagreeable about him, if you can help it; because,—don't look at me, please—because—I am going to marry him."

I don't remember what answer I made; but I suppose I must have said that such a thing was impossible, and added some strong expressions; for I remember how gently and patiently the poor girl exerted herself, as we walked on, to make me understand that she had taken a step from which she had no intention of receding. She did not pretend to be enamoured of Mr Burgess—that would have been a little too ridiculous—but she assured me that he expected nothing of the sort; that the prospect of keeping house for him, and looking after his children was not such a very disagreeable one to her; that he had been extremely kind, as had also Lady Deverell, who approved of the match, and that my mother's consent had been willingly given.

"But, gracious heavens!" I exclaimed, "if it is necessary for you to marry somebody—which

I suppose is what you mean—aren't there dozens of other men in England who would be only too glad to marry you? Besides, the old wretch has only just buried his wife. To my mind, his conduct is downright indecent."

"The dozens of men who are so eager to marry me haven't found their way into Essex," answered Nora, with a faint smile; "and, as for the wedding, there won't be any indecent haste about it. Mr Burgess wishes me to take my own time and says he would rather our engagement was not formally announced yet. Indeed, I hope—I mean I think—that he will not ask me to leave home while mamma lives."

"Is that it?" I asked, with a quick pang of apprehension. "Is she worse, then?"

"Yes; much worse. She didn't want you to know, because she said there was no use in distressing you; but about a month ago she was very ill for a few days, and the doctor told me plainly that in cases of heart-disease like hers, the end may come at any moment. Only it is quite possible that she may live on for years, if we can save her from worry and anxiety.

Now, do you understand, Phil? Of course, she is anxious and worried now, not knowing how you will take this news, and you must pretend to be pleased—anyhow, to be resigned. I don't ask you to be pleased with me, and if you can't help being disgusted with me, well, you can't help it. But you won't say so before her, will you?"

I had to give the pledge required of me. I didn't see at the time, and I don't see now, how I could have acted otherwise. Nevertheless, I said to myself very decidedly that, if Mr Burgess ever married my sister, it should be no fault of mine. It was bad enough that, for the present and for my mother's sake, he must be allowed to consider himself engaged to her.

"Don't look so miserable, Phil," said Nora; "it will all come right in the end, you'll see."

And I could not but wonder whether, in the inmost recesses of her heart, her intentions with regard to the good Rector might not, perhaps, be as perfidious as my own.

CHAPTER III.

HIS GRACE AND HIS MOTHER.

AFTER what had been told me, I anticipated a rather painful interview with my mother; and it is not unlikely that she may have anticipated a painful interview with me. If so, it was, I hope, as great a relief to her as it was to me to find our respective apprehensions groundless.

Wonderfully little passed between us upon the subject of Nora's proposed marriage. She said, with an appealing glance at me, that she believed all had been arranged for the best; and I refrained from putting forward a contrary opinion. Then something was said about Nora's love for children and the respect and affection with which she had always regarded Mr Burgess. It was further stated by one of us, and assented to by the other, that a considerable disparity of age between husband and wife

constitutes no necessary drawback to matrimonial felicity. Finally, the paramount importance of securing a home for one who might any day be left destitute was recognised on both sides; after which we hastened to speak about other matters. I suppose the truth was that we were both heartily ashamed of ourselves.

And yet my mother—poor old lady!—had no such great reason to feel ashamed. This preposterous union had not, as I gathered, been suggested or promoted by her. Lady Deverell and Mr Burgess appeared to have done the courtship between them, and the responsibility of having brought it to a successful issue rested upon them—in so far as it did not rest upon Nora herself.

“But the whole thing has really been my own doing, Phil,” Nora declared, when I gave expression to the above sentiment, before taking leave of her. “I don’t want to beg my bread, and I don’t know how to earn it; so—”

She shrugged her shoulders, and made a grimace, which, I daresay, was intended to

convince me what a heartless and selfish little cynic she was.

That was not the impression produced upon me by it, for her eyes were swimming in tears, and I knew her too well to suspect her of heartlessness or selfishness. But what could I do, except answer in a hurried and shame-faced manner that I supposed beggars must not be choosers? If I had spoken kindly to her, she would only have broken down, which would have done neither her nor me nor my mother any good.

As I said before, I was resolved not to let her marry old Burgess; but I believe I was wrong in hinting, at the end of the last chapter, that she herself had any *arrière pensée* in the matter, beyond a not unpardonable desire to put off the evil day as long as might be. The sacrifice which she contemplated is one which is made by hundreds—thousands, perhaps—of women every year; and since the results are seldom openly tragic, no doubt their examples encourage the others. I should not think, however that there can be many men to whom

the idea of marriage without love is anything short of inherently repulsive.

This being so, and the circumstances admitting of no immediate action on my part, I was glad to turn away from the connection of any such thought with my sister. For the first time in my life, I was glad to leave her, and to betake myself to Hurstbourne Castle, where, as it turned out, there was plenty of work waiting for me with which to occupy my mind.

Hurstbourne Castle ought, perhaps, rather to be known as Hurstbourne Palace; for it certainly is not a castle in the strict sense of the word—having been built in the sixteenth century, upon the site of the ancient feudal structure which was demolished to make way for it.

The late duke (so I have been told by a lady who knew him) once remarked that it was a fine place to look at, and suitable for purposes of entertainment on a large scale; but that he should be sorry to be condemned to live there. As a matter of fact, he did not live there—preferring the adjacent estate of

Lavenham, which he had purchased, and where there was a large modern house, surrounded by gardens—upon the cultivation of which he had expended a small fortune.

Hurstbourne he had been accustomed to make use of two or three times in the course of the year for the purpose just mentioned, and possibly his dislike for the place may have been connected with his well-known dislike for entertaining upon a large scale. His enormous wealth enabled him to maintain an enormous establishment in a residence which he so rarely visited; and thus it did not present a deserted or uncared-for appearance, although the general effect of it was a trifle gloomy and depressing during the winter months.

It was on a fine hot afternoon in one of the finest and hottest summers of recent years that I first made acquaintance with my future place of abode, and it certainly struck me that any duke who could not be satisfied with such a glorious and beautiful home must be an uncommonly hard duke to please. For the vast Tudor building, which is pronounced by com-

petent judges to be as perfect a specimen of that order of architecture as there is in existence, stands high, dominating a boundless expanse of park, where fallow deer and Highland cattle can scarcely be conscious of any sense of captivity, and the timber is more magnificent than anything that I know of elsewhere, and in the month of June the admiring spectator is seldom reminded of the proximity of the storm-swept German Ocean. The number of people who cannot stand country life unless they are supported by the presence of a crowd of fellow-creatures is, I know, large and increasing; but, personally, I am not capable of entering into their feelings. I was brought up in the country; I love it and everything belonging to it, be the weather fair or foul: added to which, I am not, and never was, fitted to shine in society. Consequently, I was by no means scared at the prospect of a prolonged period of solitude; nor, when I was shown the very comfortable quarters which had been prepared for my reception, did I see any reason to regret my stuffy little London lodgings.

There is no occasion to weary the reader with a detailed account of the affairs which it was now my duty to take in hand, or of the obstacles in my path which I had to surmount or push aside; I will only say, with regard to those obstacles, that they proved far less numerous than I had anticipated, and that there was every excuse for the old retainers who, at first, showed some disposition to be obstructive. New brooms cannot expect to be welcomed; it was, of course, probable that the young Duke, being so much less wealthy than his predecessor, would wish to cut down expenses, and a servant who for many years has been well paid in return for very little work naturally does not relish the idea of dismissal. However, my present instructions were to dismiss nobody, and, after a long and careful study of the documents submitted to me, I was able to arrive at the highly satisfactory conclusion that nobody needed to be dismissed. Stewards, bailiffs, gamekeepers and house servants, they were all respectful and civil to me from the outset; as soon as they understood that I

did not contemplate any sweeping reforms, they became my very good friends and did what they could to assist me in the carrying out of those which I deemed imperative. There was, to be sure, rather a superfluity of dependents; still, Hurstbourne's means were ample enough to justify him in retaining their services—always supposing that is, that he did not squander his means in London or elsewhere.

"I do hope, sir," said the house-steward, a grave, grey-headed personage, "that we shall see his Grace here before the autumn. I should think, sir, that his Grace would reside chiefly at Hurstbourne, now that Lavenham has gone away from the family."

I could give no information as to the new owner's plans, seeing that I did not possess any.

"But Lavenham hasn't gone away from the family, has it?" I asked. "I understood that it had been left to Mr Paul Gascoigne."

"Yes, sir, yes; the property was left to Mr Paul," answered the house-steward, with an air of discreet reserve. "I meant that the property had been left away from his Grace. I am

sorry for it, sir, if I may make so bold as to say so. I fear that his Grace's influence in the county may be diminished, and that some folks will be inclined to look upon Mr Paul Gascoigne as the head of the family—which he is *not*, sir."

From this, as well as from other hints which were dropped in my presence, I was led to infer that Mr Paul Gascoigne had not won the affections of his late uncle's retainers; but I asked no questions, not caring to discuss such delicate matters with those amongst whom it was obviously essential to maintain a strict standard of discipline. I will say for them, that they, on their side, abstained from questioning me more than they could help, great though their curiosity must naturally have been to hear something about the young head of the family, upon whom none of them had set eyes during his uncle's lifetime. I gave them such information as I could; I told them that he was of a generous disposition, that he was a good sportsman, that he had many friends and, to the best of my belief, no enemies.

More than that I could not tell them, because that was all, or almost all, that I myself knew about him. I was not going to mention certain misgivings which, as time went on, began to trouble me, owing to the accounts which I received from him of his expenditure.

For he did appear to me to be going the pace somewhat faster than was prudent. No doubt it was necessary that he should have a London residence, since the family mansion in Park Lane had passed into his cousin's possession, and he may have done well to purchase a large house and furniture in Berkeley Square which happened to be in the market just then; but I should have been better pleased if he had waited awhile before treating himself to a five-hundred-ton steam yacht and a deer-forest in Scotland, while his casual intimation that he proposed ere long to set up a racing-stable filled me with dismay. It was not that there was anything out of the way in a man of his income owning such luxuries—or, at all events, some of them; only, his uncle having left him literally without one penny in hard cash, I did

not see how houses and yachts and deer-forests, not to speak of racing-studs, were to be paid for without the negotiation of a considerable loan. Now, the negotiation of loans did not come within the scope of my department; so that I had to content myself with warning him that, so far as I could calculate the cost of his present scale of living, his bankers' book would show but a small balance at the end of the year. He replied by return of post that that was first-rate. "Balance indeed! Who wants a big balance?" he asked; and as I read the words, I seemed to hear the jolly laugh with which they had been written.

Hurstbourne has a clear, ringing laugh which I would defy the most saturnine of mortals to resist. When he indulges in it he shuts his eyes and throws back his head, displaying a fine double row of white teeth, and in another moment everybody within ear-shot of him has begun to grin or chuckle. No doubt he was at that time doing a great deal towards promoting the general hilarity in London; for, judging by the reports which penetrated to

our nothern regions during that period of Jubilee, he was taking part in every species of obtainable amusement. Under the circumstances, he could not without obvious hypocrisy have pretended to lament his deceased uncle, and nobody, I believe, has ever thought of accusing Hurstbourne of hypocrisy.

When the London season was at an end, he betook himself, as was to be expected, to Goodwood and Cowes, and I presumed that he would proceed from thence to Scotland. I was, therefore, both pleased and surprised when, towards the middle of August, I received a notification from him to the effect that he was coming home, accompanied by his mother, and that he hoped the spare bedrooms were all right, because he had asked a lot of people down to stay. The spare bedrooms were all right, and, indeed, everything in the house was all right; the late owner having, it appeared, been in the habit of allowing *carte blanche* to the housekeeper in the matter of necessary renewals of furniture, and having also had the decency to let the furniture go with the

title; so that the only thing I had to think about was the organising of a suitable reception for the new Duke.

Aided by the steward, the bailiff and others, I was able to arrange this to my satisfaction. The tenantry turned out on horseback, triumphal arches were erected, a holiday was accorded to the school children, and shortly before the appointed hour I arrived at Lavenham Road Station, with an illuminated address tucked under my arm, which Mr Higgins, the senior tenant, who was to present it, had intrusted to me, explaining that when he mounted his young mare he preferred to have the free use of both hands. I was quite astonished to see such a crowd upon the platform, where I became aware of many faces hitherto unknown to me, nor could I account for the presence of half-a-dozen strange servants attired in the Gascoigne livery; but when Mr Higgins, very red in the face after his ride, joined me, he cleared up the mystery and gave me information as to what he and I agreed was a somewhat awkward *contretemps*. Mr Paul Gascoigne, it seemed, had selected this day of all others for

taking formal possession of his property; he was coming down in the same train with the Duke; for him also triumphal arches had been set up; his tenantry, like ours, had assembled to welcome him; and the worst of it was that he had a much larger array of tenants than his cousin could boast of.

“He have done it o’ purpose, sir,” the old man said, adding some forcible expressions which, as Mr Higgins is churchwarden, I forbear to record. “His nature it is to spoil sport, and true to his nature he will be so long as there’s life in the ugly carcass of him, you may depend. Now, I ain’t got no quarrel with them as is bound to receive him proper; but it do grieve me to think that his Grace must drive away from this station in a carriage and pair, when that there feller has got four hosses and postillions waiting for him.”

We might have had four horses, and I was sorry that I had not thought of it; but there was no time to make any alteration in the arrangements; so I stated boldly that the Prince of Wales habitually sat behind a pair, and that

in these days of macadamised roads, leaders were considered as not only useless but as savouring of vulgar ostentation.

I don't know whether Mr Higgins was satisfied; but I know that I was not, and when the train drew up beside the platform and Hurstbourne stepped out of a saloon carriage, I saw at once by his face that he, too, was a little bit annoyed. He was followed by a stout lady, whose hair was of that peculiar golden tint which has never yet been known to grow naturally upon a human scalp, and to whom he introduced me, saying,—

“You ought to be acquainted with my mother, Martyn, for she has been acquainted with you by repute for a very long time.”

She had a good-natured face, and she said a few kindly words to me as she shook hands; and she manifested quite plainly the vexation which her son was making gallant efforts to disguise.

The next person to emerge from the train was a tall, thin, clean-shaven man with an eye-glass, whose identity was immediately revealed

by the somewhat uncalled-for haste with which his henchmen pushed forward to greet him. I could not altogether agree with Mr Higgins that his carcass was an ugly one, although I did not much like the look of him. He wore a deprecating and faintly amused air, as who should say, "I am really very sorry to have put anyone to inconvenience; but it is no fault of mine. I can't help it, my dear cousin, if I am a bigger man than you, and I can't prevent all these good people from displaying their natural affection for me."

I believe he actually did say something almost as bad as that to Hurstbourne, on taking leave of him, after they had received and responded to their respective addresses and were moving towards the exit, amidst an outburst of cheering, which, let us hope, was meant to be divided impartially between them.

"I must say," exclaimed Lady Charles, as we seated ourselves in the carriage, "that that man's impudence is past all bearing. Anybody else would have felt ashamed of having schemed to defraud a relation of his rights, but he positively

glories in it. Thank Heaven, he hasn't got the title—though, I believe, if he could see his way to get it by poisoning you without risk of detection, he would."

"Oh, come, mother," said Hurstbourne laughing, "he isn't so bad as all that, and I daresay he didn't scheme. But he's an irritating beggar, I admit, and I don't think it was very pretty of him to come down and take the shine out of us in this way."

"We'll take the shine out of him before we've done with him," returned Lady Charles in a resolute voice.

Lady Charles Gascoigne was a vulgar woman, and the vulgarity of her mind was destined to cause me much subsequent annoyance, because I did not think that the influence which she exercised over Hurstbourne was a salutary one; but it is mere justice to her to own that she was kind-hearted and that, according to her lights, she had been a good wife and mother. The only daughter of a rich Birmingham merchant, she had cheerfully acquiesced in the squandering of her fortune by her husband, and had as cheer-

fully submitted to privations in order that her son might be enabled to associate with his equals. I am sure she would have cut off her right hand to serve him ; if she did not know how to serve him wisely, perhaps she was not to blame for her incapacity. Later in the evening, when our stately progress had been accomplished without a hitch, and the tenants had been refreshed, and Hurstbourne had addressed them in a neat little speech, she was so good as to take an opportunity of morally patting me on the head.

“His Grace,” said she (it was one of her provoking habits to speak always of her son in that absurd way), “has a great esteem for you, Mr Martyn, and I do feel that we are much indebted to you for all the trouble that you have taken. It is such an immense blessing in a large establishment like this to have a gentleman to whom one can give instructions, and who will see that they are probably carried out. His Grace, as you know, is by no means as rich as he ought to be ; still, he is very desirous of entertaining his visitors in a style befitting his rank, and I am sure you will

understand how vexed he would be if his cousin, who, I believe, is going to have a large house-party next week, were to out-do him in any way."

I certainly did not think that it would be worth his Grace's while to out-do in the matter of splendour a man who was notoriously far more wealthy than he; but I only bowed and held my peace. What disquieted me more than Lady Charles's ambition was a remark which fell from Hurstbourne himself, while we were sitting in the smoking-room after she had gone to bed.

"I've no quarrel with that fellow Paul," said he, "and I'm not going to quarrel with him so long as he chooses to keep friends; but I don't mean him to ride rough-shod over me either, and if he tries that on, I expect there will be a fight."

Now, Hurstbourne was a combative little man, and, considering what the respective situations of the rivals were, it seemed not unlikely that his combativeness might assert itself after a very foolish fashion.

CHAPTER IV.

A HOUSE-WARMING.

ON the following morning Hurstbourne and I went out for a ride together. He said he wanted to have a look at his new dominions, and certainly he could not have made acquaintance with them under more favourable conditions; for a light wind was blowing from the eastward, which tempered the heat of the sun, and the whole face of Nature wore so smiling and peaceful an aspect, that we might almost have fancied ourselves as many miles south of London as we actually were north of that grimy, sweltering city. Our horses, having for a long time past done no work beyond their daily walking exercise, were fat and out of condition; so that they gave us no trouble, and we could chat quite comfortably as we jogged across the grass. Hurstbourne, with his mouth open, kept on drawing

long breaths of the salt-laden breeze into his lungs, and heaving little sighs of contentment.

"This is something like," said he. "This is better than Hyde Park, and a very great deal better than stifling ball-rooms. I wish I could live here all my days, like a country gentleman, and perhaps run up to town for a couple of months or so in the season."

"I wish you would," I replied, "and I know no earthly reason why you shouldn't."

He shook his head, and assured me that there were lots of reasons why such a scheme of existence must be regarded as impracticable in his case.

"I don't want to be an absolute cypher," he explained; "I don't think a Duke of Hurstbourne ought to be that. My uncle, to be sure, lived his own life and didn't bother himself much about politics or society; but then he was so beastly rich that it wasn't possible to disregard him, and he knew very well that he could make his power felt at any moment if he chose. It's rather different with me, you see; I must keep myself pretty promi-

nently before the eyes of the world, or I shall sink into downright insignificance."

I asserted somewhat hastily that a duke can never be an insignificant personage; but he responded by naming one or two wearers of the strawberry-leaves to whom I had to admit that the adjective applied, and he added that he was not desirous of swelling that inglorious list.

"My mother," said he, "saw from the first how it would be; and a sharp fellow like you has most likely discovered already that my mother has a head upon her shoulders."

I had been sharp enough to discover that Lady Charles Gascoigne had a singularly foolish head upon her shoulders; but, naturally, I did not hint at anything so impolite as that. I merely inquired in what particular fashion her ladyship desired that her son should render himself prominent.

"Oh, not in one way more than another," he answered; "only she sees what you yourself must have seen yesterday, that Paul Gascoigne means to over-shadow me, if he can

and she thinks I should be an ass to submit to it. So do I, for the matter of that."

Being unable to concur in such sentiments, I held my tongue, and he went on to eulogise his mother in terms which were half painful, half comical to a disinterested hearer. He did not stop at declaring her to be the cleverest woman of his acquaintance; as I am a sinful man, he proceeded to praise her personal beauty, the remarkable youthfulness of her appearance and her unerring good taste. Often and often have I wondered whether Hurstbourne's filial affection and admiration were in reality what they were ostensibly. One knows how a man will take you into his stables and defiantly forestall criticism by claiming points for his horses which are the very points they lack. "You imagine," he seems to say, "that that animal is not well-ribbed back, or that that fore-leg upon which you have fixed your eye shows signs of a splint; but let me tell you that you are utterly and ridiculously mistaken." Perhaps one thinks that he ought to know best; in any case, one

refrains from saying what one had been going to say. But, upon the whole, I really do believe that Hurstbourne was sincere. It is his nature to be like that; his geese are swans; the people whom he loves cannot do wrong, and I am afraid also that the few people whom he hates cannot do right.

It was plain enough that he hated his cousin. He did not say so; but he gave me to understand as much, and I gathered that the large and influential assemblage which he was about to entertain was intended to be in some sort a slap in the face to the neighbouring potentate. He furnished me with a list—and a very imposing list it was—of the guests who were to arrive that day and the next. There were two Cabinet Ministers among them and a host of lords and ladies, some of whose names were familiar to me, while others, as I learnt from him, were stars of the first magnitude in that system which revolves round a royal sun.

“I’m going to make a sort of house-warming business of it, don’t you know,” said he

"One is bound to have a house-warming, eh? Anyhow, my mother thinks so, and her idea is to give a big dinner to the neighbours, followed by a ball. She has found out that there's no ball-room at Lavenham; so we ought to score one there."

This sounded very feminine, and, whatever Hurstbourne may be, he is not a feminine person; but who doesn't know the disastrous effects of feminine influence upon the best of men? It is in fact upon the best of men, I think, that such influence proves the most deteriorating; only a downright brute can boast that he is his wife's master. Lady Charles, it is true, was not Hurstbourne's wife; but he was such a good fellow, that a mother was almost as bad as a wife to him. So there was evidently nothing for it but to engage in this contemptible contest, and as soon as we returned to the house I had an interview with the housekeeper, who informed me that she had already been in consultation with her ladyship.

Neither then nor at any subsequent time was

I brought into collision with her ladyship. Her notions with regard to entertaining were somewhat magnificent; but then it was quite right, and, indeed, inevitable, that if Hurstbourne was to entertain at all, he should do so in a magnificent style. There was money enough to meet current expenses, there was plenty of wine in the cellars, and it was not my business—at any rate for the present—to protest against such orders as had been given. The exalted personages who proceeded to take up their quarters with us were not, I trust, dissatisfied with the board and lodging provided for them, nor, with such an army of well-trained domestics at command, was there any difficulty about making them comfortable. Of course, I kept out of their way as much as I could. I was only a sort of upper servant, though my dear old Hurstbourne was at great pains to explain to each and all of them that I was under his roof in the character of a tried and valued friend. I don't for a moment suppose that they believed him; still they were kind enough to refrain from tramp-

ling upon me, and I had to play lawn-tennis with some of them, no sport being obtainable at that time of the year for the employment of their leisure hours.

The big dinner proved, all things considered, a big success. The lord-lieutenant of the county and the other local celebrities, great and small, were present at it; they were charmed, as well they might be, with their genial host; they did not seem to be much shocked by their genial hostess; and my only reason for speaking in qualified terms of the triumph of the feast is, that Mr Paul Gascoigne was one of those who sat down to it. I frankly confess that I am unable to draw an impartial portrait of Paul Gascoigne. All I can find to say for him is that he is a gentleman of unblemished reputation, that he has earned a high character for benevolence, and that he is one of those wealthy and respectable mediocrities from whom the rank and file of British statesman are commonly recruited. He is irrevocably destined to be a Secretary of State one of these fine

days. Unfortunately, he is one of those people—everybody is acquainted with a few such—who have always been personally abhorrent to me; people whom one cannot greet in the ordinary manner without an almost irresistible longing to rub one's hand vulgarly afterwards upon one's trousers; people to whom one cannot manage to speak civilly, although one has no excuse whatsoever for describing them as scoundrels. I have said already that he was tall, thin, clean-shaven, and that he wore an eyeglass; I may add now that he was rather good-looking than otherwise, and that he had a clear, not unmelodious voice. To what the prompt aversion which I conceived for him was due I cannot explain, because I don't know. It was not, at all events, due to his air of slightly contemptuous patronage, nor even to the irritating way in which he made himself at home and seized opportunities of addressing each of the servants by name. Hurstbourne Castle had, as a matter of fact, been his home for many years, and he was perhaps entitled to remind

us of the circumstance. However, if I had not already hated him in the earlier part of the evening, I daresay I should have done so when the ladies left us after dinner, and when he deliberately set to work to provoke his cousin.

"How are you getting on with the good people hereabouts, Arthur?" he inquired, dangling his eyeglass on his fore-finger and adopting very much the tone which a good-natured sixth-form boy might adopt in addressing a youngster. "You'll find the farmers rather a hard-headed lot to deal with; though my impression of them—and of course I know them pretty well—is that their Radicalism is only skin deep. Still you must take them the right way, if you want to do any good with them."

"I haven't spoken to them about that sort of thing," answered Hurstbourne; "but, perhaps, if I had, I shouldn't have tried to convert them from what you call Radicalism."

"My dear fellow, you surely don't mean to say that you yourself are a Radical? That would be very funny."

"Would it? Well, I don't suppose I am so funny as that. I have always been a Liberal, like the rest of our family," said Hurstbourne, who, I am sure, had never in his life been guilty of holding any political opinions whatsoever.

"The rest of our family? Oh, if you mean my uncle, I can assure you that he was as good a Tory as I am, although, for the sake of old traditions, he called himself a Liberal Unionist. For my own part, I don't think it is either wise or honest to use thin disguises, and that is why I proclaim myself openly as being what I am."

"Well, so long as you do that, nobody is likely to question your wisdom or your honesty," remarked Hurstbourne, cutting short the harangue upon which an elderly statesman, who was seated beside him, had embarked. "We mustn't begin to talk politics, ; or we sha'n't get out of the room in time to receive the dancing people. What are you drinking?"

"Port, thanks. This is the '47 of course. I was so glad to let you have it. I have some of the same vintage at Lavenham; but, as I

always used to tell my uncle, it hasn't matured in the same way. I only wish it had."

"I paid you your own price for it, you know," Hurstbourne said.

"Oh, yes; you paid me what I asked. One can't really put a price upon such wine as this; but I felt that it would be a positive sin to disturb it."

He leant back in his chair and held his glass up to the light, closing one eye, while he scrutinised its contents. "Ah, I thought so," he sighed; "it has been a little bit shaken. I remonstrated with Feltham again and again about his carelessness in carrying up wine; but it was no use, and finally I had to make a point of doing it myself. The fact is, that one can't trust the best butler in the world with these delicate operations. You will find Feltham a very good, steady man in other respects, though."

Hurstbourne, who is too thorough a gentleman to resent any impertinence on the part of a guest, kept his temper admirably. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that he longed to kick the fellow, and so did I. That we were not alone

in entertaining such sentiments was made evident to me by the tightened lips and lowered brows of the country gentlemen who formed the majority of the assemblage. While we were leaving the room, one of these, a spare, gray-headed individual, whom I subsequently discovered to be Colonel Corbin, the M.F.H., told me how glad he had been to hear that the Duke was a hunting as well as a shooting man.

"In the old Duke's time," said he, "that beggar Paul Gascoigne had things all his own way, and the consequence was, that we never drew these coverts, except for form's sake. I wish to heaven we hadn't got him at Lavenham; but it's something that he doesn't rule the roost hereabouts any more."

"Mr Gascoigne doesn't hunt, then?" said I interrogatively.

"He! Lord bless your soul, no; he wouldn't risk his precious person in that way. He can shoot, or he thinks he can—well, I believe he is a pretty fair shot. But he's no sportsman, as I've taken the liberty of telling him more than once."

From this, and from other remarks, which were

made to me during the evening, I was led to conclude that Mr Gascoigne enjoyed no greater popularity amongst his equals in the county than he did amongst his inferiors. Yet money is power, and if the men, or some of them, fought shy of him, the ladies appeared to like him very well. I watched him from the retired position which I had taken up in a corner of the ball-room, and I saw that the old women welcomed him eagerly, while such of the young ones as he was pleased to dance with evidently exerted themselves to earn his approval. He was, however, a bad dancer, and probably he did not care enough about any of the young ladies to exhibit himself under an unbecoming aspect for their benefit. Long before the supper hour he ceased to adventure himself in the throng and sauntered down the long room, pausing every now and again to address a few condescending words to this or that person among the lookers-on, until he reached the spot where I was standing, when he was good enough to lean against the wall, by my side, and enter into conversation.

“Am I to compliment you upon this brilliant transformation scene, Mr Martyn?” he inquired. “You are playing Mentor to Arthur’s Telemachus, I am told, and certainly I can’t imagine that either he or his mother possess the decorative skill of which we see so many evidences around us. It is difficult to believe that this is really the same old Hurstbourne Castle which my uncle and I used to regard as the dreariest of our abodes.”

I said that the credit of having arranged the floral display which he admired was due, I believed, to the head gardener, and I added that my duties were not of the nature alluded to.

“No? That is almost a pity, I think; for if the entertaining department is to be confided to Lady Charles, I am afraid we shall not always have such cause to congratulate ourselves as we have to-night. There she is, and one must make the best of her; but who her friends are, and what sort of people she will invite to stay in the house, one shrinks from conjecturing. She appears to be a worthy kind of woman in her way, though. Has she got

Arthur completely under her thumb, do you think?"

I replied that I really didn't know, but that a man of Hurstbourne's age is usually assumed to be out of leading-strings.

"Oh, but that is a very unwarrantable assumption," he rejoined, laughing. "Arthur, I should say, would always be in leading-strings, and I was rather in hopes that you held them. I suppose he wouldn't listen to good advice from me; but he stands sorely in need of good advice from somebody, I assure you. He is trying, you see, to make a pint-pot hold a quart, which is an experiment that has never yet been crowned with success, often as it has been attempted. He may hold on for a year or two, if he doesn't bet; but, of course, he will bet. I am sorry for it,—especially as it won't be in my power to help him by buying this estate, which is entailed; but *quos Deus vult perdere*—"

He shrugged his shoulders and turned away, leaving me with a firm conviction that he had meant me to report those last words of his to Hurstbourne, and with an equally firm determination that

I would do no such thing. He would have alarmed me more if his malevolence had not been so obvious; still, even as it was, he did contrive to make me feel uneasy. The deer-forest and the yacht and the home entertainments were all very well; but when a man takes to owning race-horses and backing them, who can fix any limit to his possible liabilities?

My somewhat gloomy meditations were presently interrupted by the subject of them, who came running across the room to ask me what in the world I meant by not dancing.

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself, you lazy beggar. Come along and be introduced to the youth and beauty of the neighbourhood.”

But I was not destined to become acquainted with the youth and beauty of the neighbourhood that evening; for he had not towed me a dozen paces before we were intercepted by a servant, who handed me a telegram which, he said, had just been brought from the station. I knew instinctively that it had come from Nora. I knew what its contents must be, and when I tore it open, my worst fears were veri-

fied. I showed it to Hurstbourne, who glanced at the urgent summons which it conveyed—*“Come home at once. Mother is very ill”*—and who, like the good, kind fellow that he is, wasted no time in uttering commonplace condolences, but took prompt measures for having me sent to Lavenham Road to catch the night mail.

“They’ll stop it by signal for you,” said he; “one of the grooms shall gallop over in a minute or two to tell them. You’ll have plenty of time to pack up what things you want—a good half-hour. Good-bye, old chap; let me have a line when you can, and, of course, don’t dream of coming back here until you can leave home with a quiet mind. We’re off to Scotland next week; but I hope I shall see you again before very long.”

So we parted; and as I was being driven rapidly across the park in a dog-cart, it seemed to me by no means improbable that I had turned my back upon Hurstbourne Castle for ever.

CHAPTER V.

THE SOLUTION OF A DIFFICULTY.

IT was very good and thoughtful of Hurstbourne to have the night mail stopped for me; but in reality the stationmaster's complaisance did not save me much time; for I had to go up to London, and, when there, I was compelled to wait several hours before the early morning train left for Essex. The delay, however, was of small consequence, and indeed that was what I kept on saying to myself, while I paced wearily up and down the platform at Liverpool Street. I had read between the lines of my sister's telegram; I had guessed that her wish had been to spare me an unnecessary shock, and when, between nine and ten o'clock in the morning, I reached my destination at last, and saw that all the blinds of our poor little cottage were drawn down, there was no need for the

sobbing incoherence of the housemaid to convince me that all was over.

Nora, who evidently had not taken her clothes off all night, came downstairs presently to tell me all about it. There was not much to tell. She had been out rather late on the previous afternoon, and, on her return, had found our mother sitting, as usual, in her arm-chair and apparently asleep. Something about the attitude of the frail little figure had alarmed her; her efforts to restore animation had failed; and then she had sent for the doctor, although, long before he appeared, there had been no doubt as to the nature of the verdict.

"I didn't like to tell you what had happened," Nora said in conclusion, "because I knew how dreadfully you would feel it, and it seemed a pity that you should be made unhappy through all that long journey, with nobody to speak a word of comfort to you. But you must try to take comfort now, Phil; for her life wasn't a happy one of late, you know, and the doctor says she must have died almost painlessly. After all, there are many worse things than death."

I could quite understand her thinking so, poor child, and I was touched, as well I might be, by her ready sympathy with my sorrow, which was not, and could not be, so heavy a one to bear as hers. Nevertheless, the loss which had fallen upon us was a deep and bitter grief to us both. It is one with which almost everybody must, of necessity, make acquaintance, and, like other griefs, it is certain to be cured by lapse of time; yet there cannot be a great many people who have, or have had, a mother so patient, so indulgent and so self-sacrificing as ours had always shown herself to us, nor perhaps are there many people to whom the death of a mother means all that it meant in our case. Mr Burgess, who looked in, in the course of the day, but whom Nora declined to see, told me that we had been most mercifully dealt with and ought to feel very thankful. Possibly he was right; yet I didn't think at the time, and don't think now, that I myself should use such language if I wished to be consolatory.

Mr Burgess was anxious to ascertain my wishes

with regard to the funeral, and also displayed what struck me as a rather premature curiosity as to the disposition of my poor mother's scanty fortune. I answered his questions upon the former point; respecting the latter, I was unable to give him any immediate information, and he went away after expressing some dissatisfaction at Nora's refusal to accord him an interview. He said he hoped she was not meeting affliction in a rebellious spirit, and I replied that, to the best of my belief, she was not, but that I could not have her disturbed for the present. He did not allude to his engagement, nor did I deem it incumbent upon me to make any reference to that subject.

But of course I had to speak to Nora about it. Not until after our mother's body had been laid in its last resting-place beneath the shadow of the old grey church-tower, were plans for the future mooted by either of us; but on the succeeding morning it was plain that we must no longer shirk what was almost sure to be a painful discussion. By that time we knew the provisions of the will which Uncle John

who came down from London to attend the funeral, informed us had been drawn up under his instructions and advice. A sum of one thousand pounds was to be held in trust for Nora, while the remainder of the personalty, amounting in all to something under nine thousand, was bequeathed to me. Uncle John said the arrangement was a fair and usual one, and perhaps it was so, although it had the obvious drawback of leaving practically unprovided for a person who was not only incapable of providing for herself, but was a great deal too proud to allow her brother to provide for her.

"I couldn't possibly do such a thing, Phil," was the decisive answer which she returned to a certain proposal of mine. "Setting aside any personal scruples that I might feel about robbing you, it would be downright dishonest to treat our poor, dear old mother's will as if it didn't exist. She knew very well what she was doing when she made it, and she was certainly right. With the little that she had to dispose of, forty or fifty pounds a year was the utmost that she could be expected to leave to a married daughter."

"Only you are not a married daughter," I observed.

"Well, I shall be before long ; there is nothing to prevent me from fulfilling my engagement now."

I did not think it desirable to dispute that assertion at the moment ; but I pointed out that the wedding could hardly take place next week, or even next month.

"And what is to become of you in the meantime?" I inquired.

That was not a very easy question to answer, nor could Nora's declaration that she would manage somehow, and that I wasn't to bother myself, be regarded as disposing of it. However, Mr Burgess, when he turned up soon after luncheon, with a little pile of devotional works under his arm, came prepared with a solution of the difficulty which he was so kind as to submit to our approval. Having heard his elephantine tread upon the gravel, and having caught a glimpse of him before he rang the door-bell, I retired hurriedly into the garden to smoke. He was entitled to claim the privilege of a private interview with his *fiancée*, and if

he had anything to say to me, I presumed she would let him know where to find me.

Well, I was tolerably sure that he would have something to say to me; so that I was not surprised when, at the expiration of half an hour or thereabouts, he came pacing across the grass in order to say it. Nor, as far as that goes, was I greatly surprised at the somewhat aggrieved tone in which his remarks were delivered. He had not anticipated (so I forced him to admit in plain terms after a lengthy and circuitous preamble) that my sister would be left with so meagre a dowry. He himself was not a rich man; he had his children to consider; and, in short, he must confess that his dear friend Mrs Martyn's testament appeared to him to have been framed without due regard to the circumstances of the case.

"I am sorry for that," answered I briskly; "but of course you won't expect me to agree with you. As for your engagement to my sister, which I tell you frankly that I don't consider by any means a good bargain for her, you have only to say the word and it shall be off."

He threw up his great hands and closed his eyes in shocked deprecation of my brutality. Not by him, he solemnly affirmed, should a promise, once given, ever be revoked; I little knew him if I imagined that he was one who coveted riches, or who would be willing to sacrifice the happiness of others to his own comfort. Nevertheless, he could not but feel that, if he had a sister situated as my sister was—

“Yes, I am quite sure you would,” I interrupted, anticipating the generous course which he would adopt in such an event; “but you see, Mr Burgess, I have no pretensions to resemble you in any way, and I am not a bit inclined to pauperise myself in order that my sister may become the stepmother of your children. I only want to know what your intentions are; so that I may make our arrangements fit in with them.”

He looked pained, but disclaimed any intention of gibing, which was rather a disappointment to me. For reasons, the cogency of which he said he had no doubt that I should appreciate, he could not propose an immediate celebration of his second nuptials. Advent would be upon

us before Nora could decently lay aside her crape; Christmas was always a busy and anxious season; Lent would fall early next year; upon the whole, he did not see how he could reconcile it with his duties and obligations to be married until after Easter. He added that he had talked the matter over with dear Nora, who was quite of one mind with him about it. Then he brought forward the proposition to which I alluded just now. It was that Nora should be despatched to a certain Home by the sea-side that he knew of, where she would be well cared for by the Sisters and would be provided with work, in consideration of which no charge would be made for her keep. He said he was convinced that such a period of calm seclusion and well-doing would contribute to her spiritual as well as her temporal advantage.

I thanked him very much, and undertook to give his plan full consideration. I also promised (for indeed I was extremely anxious to get rid of him) that I would consider the earnest and affectionate counsels which he felt it right to urge upon me with regard to my personal inheri-

tance. Ought I to profit by what he feared he must call an unjust display of maternal tenderness? Ought I to consult my own ease rather than that of a helpless girl whose natural protector I was? Those were questions which he said he would leave to be decided in obedience to the dictates of my conscience, and I replied that he might safely do so.

It is, I hope, needless to say that I no more intended my sister to enter that Home than I intended her to espouse our saintly pastor; but my half-formed resolution was to some extent modified when I re-entered the house, where I found Lady Deverell seated with Nora, and was informed of an alternative project to which I felt bound to agree, although I own that I did so with some reluctance.

"It is all settled," Lady Deverell told me in benevolent, authoritative accents; "Nora is to come to me at Fern Hill as soon as you leave, and to stay with me until she marries. I shall be very pleased to have her, and I think I can answer for it that Mr Burgess will approve of her remaining in the parish. Mr Burgess

is so good and so disinterested a man that he will be sure to be pleased with what pleases her, so long as that does not conflict with his strong sense of duty."

What could I say? It was certainly kind of Lady Deverell to give such an invitation; Nora was evidently eager to accept it, and some little time must, in all probability, elapse before I could offer my sister the shelter of a roof of my own. I endeavoured, therefore, to appear grateful and gracious; but, I believe I have already mentioned that I am a clumsy creature, and perhaps my inability to swallow down the bread of charity without making a wry face over it was not concealed from our patroness. At all events, she did not make me look more pleasant (but possibly it was not her wish to do that) by saying she had heard, upon trustworthy authority, that the Duke of Hurstbourne was leading "a profligate life," and hoping that I should ere long sever my connection with one whose example could not but be injurious to me.

I replied that the risk of contagion was com-

paratively slight, seeing that the greater part of his time had been spent, and was likely to be spent, away from Hurstbourne Castle; after which I effected a change of subject. I could not quarrel with the woman whose helping hand I had just taken on my sister's behalf, nor could I very well help quarrelling with her if I allowed her to calumniate my friend any farther.

I had, however, made up my mind, on other grounds than those so charitably urged by Lady Deverell, that I must resign the post which I held at Hurstbourne Castle. What my future occupation was to be I hardly knew (I am afraid I must confess that I had some thought of earning a living by my pen); but my first duty clearly was to secure a humble home in London and remove Nora to it. She could not refuse to keep house for me, even though she would not hear of putting her fingers into my purse. Nevertheless, she would, I knew, have refused to let me give up my present employment on her account, and for that reason I refrained from telling her what I proposed to do.

A few days later we parted. We had only been yearly tenants of our cottage, for which a new occupant was found without much difficulty; the furniture was to be sold by auction, and such of our belongings as we had been unwilling to relinquish had, by Lady Deverell's permission, been transported to the lumber room at Fern Hill.

"I suppose the next time I shall see you, will be on my wedding-day, Phil," Nora said rather wistfully, when I took leave of her; to which I replied that there was a very fair chance of our meeting again before that auspicious date.

I did not want to have a scene—like the majority of male Anglo-Saxons, I prefer letting people divine my sentiments to expressing them—but I did feel that I was a horrid brute, as I drove towards the station and realised how completely my poor Nora must be convinced that I had abandoned her. I went straight to Hurstbourne Castle, where I had some matters of business to attend to; thence I telegraphed to Glendwinish Lodge, which was the name

of Hurstbourne's newly-acquired Highland residence, to ask whether he could put me up for a night, as I was anxious to confer with him; and, on receiving an affirmative reply, I proceeded northwards.

On reaching my destination, I found a rather large party assembled in a house of moderate dimensions, for it appeared that there were grouse as well as red-deer upon the Glendwinish estate, and when I heard the names of some of the noblemen and gentlemen who were partaking of my patron's hospitality, I perceived that the prospects of sport held out to them must have been of no mean order. The natural inference was that the price demanded for such a property must have been a heavy one; but that, as I reflected with a sigh, was a point as to which I had no longer any right to feel anxiety. The men were tired after a long day's shooting, and most of them went to sleep even before they went to bed; Lady Charles, who was the sole representative of her sex, disappeared immediately after dinner; so that the evening was not far advanced when

Hurstbourne, who had clad himself in a gorgeous smoking-suit, was able to lead me into a small room on the ground-floor where, he said, we could talk without any fear of being interrupted. He handed me a cigar, pushed me into an arm-chair and began—

“Now, I know very well what has brought you here, old chap. I’ve been outrunning the constable, and you’ve come all this way to lecture me, isn’t that it? Well, now you’re here, you’ll have to stop and help us to bring the grouse down, that’s all. Of course, I’ve parted with a good lump of money; but it’s the first start that comes so expensive, don’t you see? Don’t you fret yourself; by this time next year I shall be quite a capitalist. That is, if I have any sort of luck.”

I explained that, although his method of converting himself into a capitalist did not strike me as a particularly promising one, it was not on that account that I had made so bold as to invite myself to Glendwinish. I had already informed him by letter of my mother’s death; I now thought it best to tell him quite

candidly how I was circumstanced. I narrated the whole story of Nora's engagement to Mr Burgess and Lady Deverell's proffered hospitality, concluding by saying that I was sure he would understand how necessary it was that I should hand in my resignation, now that it had become imperative upon me to take my sister under my wing.

"My dear fellow," he returned unhesitatingly, "there isn't the slightest necessity in the world for you to resign your functions, unless you want to resign them. I quite agree with you that you will have to get your sister away from that old tabby and her pet parson; but what is to prevent her from joining you at Hurstbourne? Surely the house is large enough to hold two of you; and, for about three-quarters of the year, you'll have it to yourselves. I tell you plainly, Martyn, that I shall think it deuced unfriendly of you if you leave me in the lurch like this, at a moment's warning; and you will hardly be such an old humbug as to pretend that I shall lay you under any obligation by offering your sister

house-room. You know as well as anybody that the amount of food which a young lady is likely to consume won't make a perceptible difference in the cost of keeping up the establishment."

That, of course, was a statement which could not be controverted; but I pointed out to him that the extent of an obligation is not always to be measured by the standard of pounds, shillings and pence; and, sincerely though I was touched by his kindness, I felt compelled to decline it. He argued with me for the best part of an hour, and I had some ado to resist appeals the force of which I could not help inwardly acknowledging. However, I did resist them; and at length he jumped up suddenly and made for the door, halting upon the threshold to say—

"Stay where you are. I'll be with you again in half a second."

He did not return quite so soon as that. But I don't think more than twenty minutes had elapsed before he re-entered the room, dragging after him a lady who appeared to

have arrayed herself somewhat hurriedly in a lace-bordered dressing-gown, and whose golden locks were piled on to the top of her head after a fashion which displayed the silver undergrowth only too plainly to the amazed beholder.

“Don’t look at me, Mr Martyn!” exclaimed Lady Charles, who, like the good-natured soul that she was, was evidently almost as much tickled as vexed at being exhibited in such a plight. “It’s all Arthur’s fault. He has taken it into his head that, if we can’t persuade you to do as we wish to-night, you will be off the first thing in the morning; and he thinks I can persuade you, though he can’t.”

She came and laid her hand on my shoulder, adding—

“Now, my dear, good man, you mustn’t be so stupid and obstinate about it. What do you know about girls and their requirements? At any rate, you do know what *our* requirements are; and you may take my word for it that your sister will be happier, as well as more welcome, under our roof than she would

be with that sanctimonious old Lady Deverell. She shall be free to do exactly as you and she please; but if you like to let me chaperon her, I will; and I really am a perfectly respectable woman, though I know I don't look like one at the present moment."

She was so kind, so natural, and so obviously sincere—she did not even remember to call Hurstbourne his Grace—that I ended by yielding to her solicitations. I don't know whether I was right or wrong; I often thought, afterwards, that I had been very wrong indeed; but, hypocritical as it may sound to say so, I did honestly believe at the time that I should be doing these good people a service by remaining with them, while it is needless to add that the service which they proposed to render to Nora was, in my view, an almost incalculable one.

CHAPTER VI.

NORA SCORES A SUCCESS.

NOTWITHSTANDING Hurstbourne's kindly entreaties, I set my face south on the following day without having exterminated a single grouse. I was eager—perhaps too eager—to remove my sister from the neighbourhood of Mr Burgess, and I wanted to lose no time in imparting to her what I hoped she would regard as good news. From subsequent avowals which I have received from her, I am led to believe that she did so regard it; but at the time she disappointed me a good deal by raising a cloud of difficulties, so that quite a lengthy correspondence took place between us before the last of her scruples was overcome. It is true that both she and I had to reckon with Lady Deverell, who was strongly, not to say bitterly, opposed to our scheme, and who wrote to me upon the subject in very forcible terms.

“I do not expect gratitude,” she declared, in one of her epistles; “I do not expect my personal wishes to have any weight with one whom I have done my best to befriend, but I do expect that young people who have been brought up as you and Nora have been should have some slight sense of reason and propriety. To accept hospitality from me is one thing; to accept it from such a woman as Lady Charles Gascoigne, who, even if her position in society were what it is not and *never can be*, would still be a total stranger to you and your family, is quite another. Of the Duke of Hurstbourne I will only say that he is a very young man and, by all accounts, a very dissipated and irreligious young man. Whether it is expedient that your sister should become a member of his household I must leave it to your conscience and your common sense to decide. You and she are free agents; you can manage your affairs as may seem best to you; but upon you must fall the responsibility of having placed your sister (if you should so determine) in a thoroughly false position.”

Most people, I daresay, will think that, if Lady Deverell did not express herself over and above courteously, she nevertheless had reason on her side; but I confess that to me her discourtesy was more apparent than her reasonableness. It was absurd to say that Nora was about to become a member of Hurstbourne's household; it was certainly false to speak of him as dissipated and irreligious; while, as for Lady Charles, I really could not see what her social status had to do with either of us. Therefore I gave Lady Deverell to understand that her views were not mine, and hinted, with all necessary politeness and circumlocution, that I proposed to undertake the conduct of my own business. Mr Burgess, so far as I could gather, took no active part in the discussion. Rightly or wrongly, I imagined that Mr Burgess was a good deal less keen about his second marriage than he had been before the provisions of my mother's will had been made known to him.

However that may be, the upshot of it all was, that Nora and her modest belongings were deposited at Lavenham Road Station one fine

evening, and that she was able to bring with her an assurance of the consent, if not precisely the approval, of her betrothed. I should have been just as well pleased had she been provided with neither the one nor the other; but when I said something to that effect, she implored me, as a personal favour, to abstain from such remarks for the future.

"It is all settled," she declared, "and my having left Essex doesn't alter anything. Lady Deverell chooses to make out that my having come to you is a sort of preliminary to jilting Mr Burgess, but he doesn't think so, and of course it isn't so. No actual date has been fixed, but, I suppose, if I have another six months of spinsterhood before me, it's about as much as I have. Let us enjoy those six months together as much as we can, Phil. I'm afraid we sha'n't enjoy them at all, unless we can agree to put other people out of sight and out of mind."

It was doubtless impossible for either of us to carry out that compact to the letter; but it was both possible and agreeable to avoid all

mention of Mr Burgess's name, and I need scarcely say that I, for my part, had no sort of wish to mention the man. As for our enjoying ourselves together, I can answer for it that that part of the programme was faithfully executed by one of us, and I think I may add that it was by the other also.

We had, in fact, everything to make us happy. We had liberty, which, I take it, is almost the chief of earthly blessings; we had all the small luxuries belonging to wealth, which are not to be despised; we had horses to ride (for Hurstbourne, doubting my willingness to make myself entirely at home, had despatched special instructions to the stud-groom upon the subject), and we had congenial society. By that I mean that we had each other's society; but we were likewise favoured by the friendly visits and invitations of the neighbours, who showed us much kindness, and did not seem to think that there was anything extraordinary in the circumstance of my sister's being domiciled in the Castle with me, though I have since been assured that they must have thought it very odd indeed. If so,

I can only say that they disguised their sentiments with singular skill and success.

It is, I should think, most unlikely that I shall ever again be as happy and as free from care as I was that autumn, when I ought by rights to have been full of care and anxiety about the future. It was then that I composed the greater part of those poetical works to which I have made allusion above, and I was not ashamed to read them to my companion, who, on her side, affirmed without a blush that they were more spirited and stirring than any compositions of the kind that had previously come under her notice. Idiotic as it may have been of me to swallow even a grain of such flattery, I did swallow it, and liked it; but I can honestly say that I did not derive half as much pleasure from that as I did from the daily evidences of returning gaiety and good spirits with which Nora gladdened my heart. I remember her saying to me, as we rode homewards one evening, while the sun was sinking in the west behind a gorgeous bank of ruddy and golden clouds, that she now knew for the first time

in her life what it was to be absolutely contented.

"If only we could go on like this—just you and I together, Phil—until we died, how glorious it would be!" she exclaimed. Then she sighed and added: "However, since we can't, and since it is always as well to have something reasonable to hope for, let us hope that the Duke of Hurstbourne won't take it into his head to come here and disturb us this winter."

As far as I could see, there was no likelihood of our being interfered with in the way of which she spoke. Hurstbourne had gone from Scotland to Newmarket, and in his last letters he talked of spending the winter months at Melton. Wherever he went, he took his mother with him, which would, no doubt, have been a good thing had Lady Charles been a different sort of woman. As it was, one could only admire his filial devotion and trust that her ladyship might show herself in some degree worthy thereof. It certainly did not occur to me that the death of Colonel Home, one of the county members,

would effect any alteration in Hurstbourne's plans; yet it seemed that I had under-estimated my friend's interest in contemporary politics, for one morning in December I received the following telegram from him—

“Must be home for election. Arrive to-morrow evening. Only self and mother for a few days.”

The wording of the above missive was, it will be perceived, somewhat ambiguous. Did he mean that he and his mother were only coming for a few days, or that other people would join them after a few days? Nora, being of a sanguine temperament, inclined to the former belief; my own impression was in favour of the latter, inasmuch as, after all, the nomination day had not yet been fixed, nor did we even know whether the seat was to be contested or not. It turned out that I was right. Hurstbourne had abandoned all present idea of hunting (a sacrifice made easier for him by the prevalence of north-east winds and hard frost) in order that he might bring that influence to bear

upon the coming election, from which, I believe, peers of the realm are supposed to abstain, and he had invited various eloquent and celebrated personages to come down and assist him.

However, it was not until some hours after we had had the privilege of welcoming him and his mother that he alluded to the cause of their sudden descent upon us. They were both of them as kind as possible. They took Nora's presence quite as a matter of course, making no fuss about it, and treating her not so much like a guest as like one of the family. I had known beforehand that Lady Charles would be kind, only I had feared that she would be rather patronising; but she was not in the least so, and she had not been a quarter of an hour in the house before I saw, to my great satisfaction, that she and my sister were going to be friends. I don't think she ever thoroughly liked me—probably she was a little jealous of my power over her son—but she took a fancy to Nora from the first, and she could not have been more

considerate and thoughtful and natural with the girl if she had been as well-bred as she was, unhappily, vulgar.

As for Hurstbourne, never yet have I met the man or woman with whom he was incapable of becoming intimate at a moment's notice. Long before dinner was over Nora and he were like brother and sister; they had discussed every horse in the stables, had differed as to the merits of the animals, had backed their respective opinions, and had agreed to bring matters to a decisive issue on the first open day. When Nora wished me good-night, she whispered to me—

“Your Duke is as delightful as if his name were Brown, Jones or Robinson, and he had just come home from school for the holidays. I don't want him to stay *too* long; but I think we may manage to put up with him for a week, or even a fortnight.”

In the smoking-room I learnt that our host was likely to remain with us for at least that length of time. He was determined, he informed me, that no effort on his part should

be wanting to secure the return of Mr Somers, the Liberal-Unionist candidate.

"And, of course, it's a most unfair and disgraceful thing that a Tory should come forward to stand against him. Everybody says so. Don't you think so yourself?"

I confessed to that absence of prejudice which belongs to total ignorance.

"I thought," said I, "it was understood that Unionists were not to be disturbed. Who is this malignant Tory, and what does he mean by breaking away from the allegiance which he owes to the wire-pullers?"

"Good gracious me! don't you know who he is? Why, Paul Gascoigne, of course! I hear that his own people have begged him to retire; but he won't. He has the cheek to swear that the constituency is Conservative—though everybody knows that it has returned Whigs to Parliament from time immemorial—and that the late man only got in because he had pledged himself to support the Government. He pretends that Somers, who has owned to holding rather Radical

views upon certain questions, can't be trusted; and the worst of it is that he has immense local influence. We shall have a hard fight for it, as far as I can make out; but I believe we shall win."

He evidently enjoyed the prospect of a fight with his cousin, whatever might be the result of it, and I am afraid my sage advice that he should temper zeal with discretion was altogether thrown away upon him.

"Don't be alarmed, old man," said he, laughing. "I won't bring myself within reach of the arm of the law. But I'm not going to conceal my opinions, and I believe I'm entitled to let Somers have the use of my carriages on the polling-day. Meanwhile, if only this beastly frost will give, you and I will have a day or two with these hounds, and we'll take Miss Nora out with us. I'm awfully glad she rides; I like a girl who can ride, don't you?"

The Fates ordained that Nora should be denied any opportunity of showing how deserving she was of Hurstbourne's regard in

that respect, for the frost, far from giving increased in intensity; so that on the following day it became plain that there was nothing to be done but to send, post-haste, to the neighbouring town for a supply of skates.

The park at Hurstbourne Castle boasts of a large sheet of ornamental water, which in hard weather has always been thrown open to the skating public, so that when we betook ourselves thither, we found quite a numerous concourse of people disporting themselves upon the ice and received a warm greeting from many of them. The young Duke, I soon saw, was going to be popular—it is not very difficult to be popular when one is a young duke—he speedily found favour in the eyes of such members of the assemblage as he had not been previously acquainted with, and if he was not a particularly brilliant performer on the skates, he was, at all events, a very plucky and good-humoured one. Nora and I, having been born and bred in a cold county, were tolerably proficient in the art of cutting figures, and it was to Nora's

tuition that he was pleased to submit himself. She managed to make him go through some remarkable evolutions; she chaffed him without mercy—he did not appear to mind being chaffed—for, indeed, there never lived a more unaffected or unpretending creature than he), and, seeing that they were getting on so well together, I thought I would leave them and join Lady Charles, who, enveloped in furs, was stamping up and down the bank to keep herself warm.

Lady Charles began at once to talk about Nora, of whom she spoke in language which I suppose I may be excused for calling appreciative. After all, I don't know why the fact that Nora is my sister should debar me from recognising and proclaiming her fascinations—especially as I bear no sort of personal resemblance to her.

“She is a perfectly charming girl,” Lady Charles declared—“pretty, without being self-conscious, and clever, without always struggling to say smart things, as most of them do. It shall be no fault of mine if she isn't provided

with an excellent husband by this time next year. You really must confide her to me when we go up to London in the spring. I daresay you won't care to come to town yourself; besides, you have your avocations here, which his Grace tells me you are discharging admirably."

I said I was very glad to hear that I had so far given satisfaction, and I did not think it my duty to say anything about the Reverend George Burgess, M.A.

"But isn't it rather difficult to find an excellent husband for a dowerless young woman, however pretty and clever she may be?" I inquired.

Lady Charles shook her head. "Not half so difficult as you suppose," she replied; "not half so difficult as it is to find a suitable wife for a young man of the highest station, who has every bodily and mental advantage. You see, Mr Martyn, it is essential that the Duke of Hurstbourne should marry a girl of high rank, and it is also most desirable that he should marry an heiress. The unlucky thing is that

I can't, at the present moment, lay my finger upon a single lady of high rank who has a fortune of her own, or is even likely to inherit one, and you may imagine how anxious this makes me; for I need scarcely tell you that his Grace has been run after in the most open and barefaced manner ever since he succeeded to the title."

I suggested that, under those distressing circumstances, it might be well to accept a compromise. Perhaps rank without wealth, or wealth without rank, might be put up with.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Well, if it comes to that, I am afraid we shall have to pocket our pride and take the money," she replied. "His Grace was most unfortunate at Newmarket—I daresay he has told you about it—and he has had other heavy and unavoidable expenses. Oh, yes, there is no doubt that money is more necessary for us than rank. To be sure, we already have the one, and it seems that we haven't a superfluity of the other."

Hurstbourne had not mentioned his losses at Newmarket to me; but that he had had

other heavy expenses, unavoidable or otherwise, I had been made unpleasantly aware that same morning, and this foolish lady's casual revelations disquieted me not a little. He might, I presumed, count upon ridding himself of his difficulties by espousing some rich woman; but it seemed a pity that he should be driven to have recourse to such expedients. Meanwhile, it was evident that the thought of his embarrassments did not weigh heavily upon him. He approached us after a time, grinning from ear to ear, and swearing that he wasn't going to stand this kind of thing any longer.

"Just you wait a bit," said he, turning round, as he took off his skates, to shake his finger at Nora, who was executing graceful pirouettes behind him. "I owe you one for holding me up to public obloquy and ridicule, and the first day that we get a thaw I'll remember to pay my debts. I never said I could skate; but you have committed yourself to the assertion that you can ride, and if you don't go straight, you shall hear of it, I promise you."

"Don't lose your temper just when you are

beginning to get on well," returned Nora composedly. "If you ride as recklessly as you skate, you will be all right; because, you know, you haven't a single horse in your stables who really requires to be ridden."

They wrangled all the way home, and only made friends upon the doorstep, when Hurstbourne remarked, with a sigh, that he supposed we might as well give up attempting to be jolly together any longer, as "a lot of solemn old cockalorums" would be arriving before dinner time. These honourable and right honourable gentlemen appeared in due course, primed with the speeches whereby they hoped to arouse the sluggish consciences of wavering electors, and I am bound to say that their conversation was extremely tedious. I am no politician; so that I can speak with true impartiality of those politicians with whom I have been brought into contact, and if I am wrong in my impression that a theoretical Liberal is the most wearisome and unconvincing of created beings I am willing to admit and apologise for my error; but if anybody ever persuades me to humiliate myself in

that way, I am quite sure that it will not be Hurstbourne, whose gallant efforts to swallow his yawns during the harangues to which we were treated before his guests retired for the night were piteous to behold.

"It's all very fine to be a magnate of the first water," he said to me confidentially, while we were smoking a last cigar together in peace; "but there are drawbacks, you know—most confounded drawbacks. These talking beggars, whom it is one's duty to listen to respectfully, are one of them, and, between you and me, the people who think they would like to be duchesses are another. I'm not such a very desirable duke, as dukes go; but I can tell you that, if I hadn't my mother to protect me, I should find myself engaged to somebody or other before I knew where I was."

"Your mother," I replied, "will undoubtedly engage you to somebody before you know where you are; you had better make up your mind to that. However, her choice is certain to be a wise one; and after she has disposed of you, she means to take Nora in hand. She was

telling me so while you were skating, and she most kindly offered to chaperon a humble nobody through the next London season."

Hurstbourne is the most hospitable of mankind; yet he did not second his mother's invitation with the alacrity which I should have expected of him. On the contrary, he frowned and looked quite annoyed.

"Oh, I don't think that would be a good plan," said he. "Of course you are the best judge of the sort of life that you would wish your sister to lead; but I must say that, if I had a sister, I wouldn't throw her among those London women unless I was obliged. You don't know what they are—I doubt whether any fellow can know without being a duke or a very rich man."

He proceeded to tell me what they were, supporting his assertions by sundry anecdotes which, I own, surprised me, and wound up by declaring emphatically that it would be a downright sin to launch an innocent, simple girl like my sister upon such turbid waters.

"What in the world do you think that she

would gain by it?" he inquired. "Do you imagine that she would come out of it any better or happier than she is? Do you imagine that she would learn anything more than she already knows, except a few things which you can't wish her to know?"

Well, I supposed that she might gain what they all hope to gain; that is to say—a husband. But I refrained from putting the case so coarsely to this young moralist, and after all, it was a great deal more likely than not that Lady Charles Gascoigne would forget her promise. I changed the subject by asking him how much money he had dropped over the autumn handicaps, whereupon he promptly discovered that it was high time to go to bed.

CHAPTER VII.

FIRST BLOOD.

THE influential politicians had quite a gay time of it with us. They had, of course, to show themselves at meetings and, I suppose, to prepare their speeches in advance, and the work of canvassing was carried on briskly; so that not much leisure was left to them for disporting themselves upon the ice. But there were dinner parties for them every evening, and, as these were attended by a certain number of young people, they were followed by dancing, to the strains of sundry musicians whose services had been secured from the neighbouring town. Hurstbourne danced a great deal with Nora. Whether he exhorted her to reserve her saltatory skill for provincial festivities, instead of exhibiting it in the limited space afforded by London ball-rooms, I do not know; but I imagine that he

must have given her the benefit of some quasi-fraternal advice; for she spontaneously informed me, one day, that she had no ambition to make the acquaintance of great ladies.

"Lady Charles," she remarked, "couldn't be accused by anybody of being a great lady. She is a dear old woman and she means to be very kind, and she naturally fancies that I must long for the sort of society in which she herself delights. But I shouldn't really care about it, even if I had been born a member of it, and I think you and I will spend the London season here all by ourselves, Phil. That is, unless—unless I have to leave you before it begins."

I made some discreet observation to the effect that she could not be compelled to leave me any sooner than she felt inclined. I did not want to talk about Mr Burgess, whom I hoped to get rid of by a gentle and gradual process of retreat, and I was by no means sure that I did not want Nora to have a season in London. I am not, I believe, more worldly than another; but how could I remain blind

to the advantages that might accrue to my sister from being taken up by a duke and a duke's mother. Hurstbourne, meanwhile, had converted her into so vehement a partisan that she actually found and proclaimed much to admire in Mr Somers, a stupid little sandy-haired man, who had not even sense enough to keep his opinions to himself. He avowed that he was a Radical, and appeared willing to go any lengths in the way of ordinary radicalism, though, for some reason best known to himself, he was prepared to lend his valuable support to the Irish policy of the existing administration. It seemed to me that we had got hold of about as weak a candidate as was obtainable, and I should not have been very much astonished to hear that a similar conviction was entertained by persons of greater importance than I. The Carlton, I presume, looked on at the contest with serenity, if not with absolute approval, since, in any event, the issue could not affect the Ministerial majority.

Late one afternoon, when we were drinking five-o'clock tea in the library, the rival candi-

date surprised us by calling. He followed his name into the room, looking bland and amiable, and, I daresay, not more supercilious than he could help. He had come, he said, to show there was no ill-feeling, though I cannot answer for it that those were his exact words. He shook hands with everybody, and sat down and had some tea; he evidently did not think that the course which he had adopted in standing for the division against a gentleman who had the ostensible support of his own party called for any apology from him.

"In cases of this kind," he remarked composedly, while he munched a slice of bread and butter, "one can but hope that the best man will win, and by the best man one naturally means one's own man. It is a matter of very little consequence to me, personally, whether I take my seat in the present Parliament or not; but, situated as I am, I felt that all this bother must be accepted as one of my duties."

"I hope you don't find it a very irksome duty," said Hurstbourne, rather grimly.

"Oh, not so very. It is a bore to have to

shout out commonplaces from a platform, but not more of a bore for me than it is for you and your friends. I have the great advantage, you see, of knowing exactly what I mean and saying it."

This challenge was promptly taken up by one of the eminent personages present, who said that, for his part, he knew very well what he meant, and that he would be interested in hearing the precise meaning of Mr Gascoigne's apparent desire to stir up discord in the Unionist camp. However, I don't think he obtained the information for which he asked, although Mr Gascoigne was courteously and discursively explanatory. The latter wound up by declaring that the wishes of the constituency were really his wishes; his sole object was to ascertain what these were, and if, contrary to his expectation, it should be proved to him that the division was a Radical one, he would bow to the expressed will of the majority.

"Well, if the verdict of the majority goes against you, you will have to acknowledge your-

self beaten, I suppose, whether you make a bow or not," remarked Hurstbourne. "Not that we are Radicals; but then, you know that as well as I do."

"I was under the impression that Mr Somers had sounded the Radical trumpet and thumped the Radical drum rather loudly," said Mr Gascoigne, with a smile. "You, of course, are not a Radical—indeed, it would be hardly in the nature of things that you should be—so, in the event of my being returned, you will have the consolation of knowing that the Legislature contains one more humble defender of your interests. Either way, I trust and believe that this political conflict will produce nothing resembling a breach between us."

Hurstbourne, it may be assumed, shared neither that trust nor that belief; for he only responded by a dubious sort of grunt, and the rest of us grunted in sympathy.

It is almost impossible to convey, by a mere report of his words, any idea of how exasperating and offensive Paul Gascoigne was. I daresay that what provoked us beyond all en-

duration was that, although he had sinned flagrantly against the laws of both political and social courtesy, he had the air of being quite willing to forgive us which belongs to conscious superiority. Or, if it was not that, it may have been that he obviously counted upon defeating us at the poll. I am glad to be able to add that not one of us openly lost his or her temper. It was only after he had taken his leave that we exploded; and, I must say that never in my life have I heard a man abused with more hearty unanimity.

Lady Charles, who, when roused, has a fine flow of language at command, expressed, I believe, the general opinion when she asserted that that nephew of hers was a despicable, sneaking, malicious hypocrite.

"He ought to have been a woman!" she cried, nobly surrendering the defence of her sex for the time being. "No *man* would stoop to the miserable little devices that he adopts to gratify his feelings of jealousy and revenge. As if everybody couldn't see that he came here to-day in the hope of making us

put ourselves in the wrong by quarrelling with him. And as if everybody didn't know that, if he had been the Duke of Hurstbourne, he would have backed up Mr Somers. He never *will* be the Duke of Hurstbourne, though; I can promise him that much!"

The holder of the title to which Mr Paul Gascoigne was heir-presumptive laughed a little at this promise, which, in truth, sounded a somewhat bold one; but he answered:

"All right, mother; I'll take care of myself—if only for his sake; and, if it should ever please Heaven to let me have a chance of fighting him without the gloves, I'll do my best to give him a licking that he won't forget in a hurry. For the present, I suppose, we shall have to content ourselves with licking him out of the field on the polling day."

It really did seem as if we ought to be able to accomplish that triumph, considering how universally unpopular our opponent was; yet, as the decisive moment drew near, it became increasingly evident that the struggle was going to be a close one. Promises of support

we did receive in large numbers, but those who were most competent to gauge the true sentiments of the voters expressed a good deal of doubt as to whether all those promises would be fulfilled.

Mr Gascoigne, besides being a very powerful man by reason of his wealth and his position in the county, was a fairly fluent speaker. He appeared to have convinced many of the electors that his views were those held by the late Duke. Not a few of them were persuaded that such a candidate as Mr Somers would not, in the late Duke's time, have had the countenance of the Castle; and, as the fight was not, strictly speaking, a party one, there was, we were told, a probability of numerous abstentions.

Towards the end of the time our exertions grew indefatigable, and Hurstbourne, who was in high spirits and sanguine of success, vowed that, whatever happened, a vote of thanks would be due to Nora.

"Your sister has gone about winning hearts and votes for us like a regular trump, Martyn,"

said he. "She is worth a dozen of a lazy old philosopher like you—at least, at an election time."

She is, I am sure, worth more than a dozen of me at any time, and she certainly threw herself into this fray with a vigour beyond the capacity of so lukewarm a politician as myself. All the same, I don't think that the political question can have had much to do with her enthusiasm; for she confessed to me, when nobody was listening, that in her conversations with electors and electors' wives she had been obliged to avoid all discussion of the respective programmes of Conservatives, Liberal Unionists, Gladstonians and Home Rulers.

"What is the use," she pertinently inquired, "of squabbling over matters which neither they nor I understand? This is simply a fight between the Duke and Mr Gascoigne, and if they prefer Mr Gascoigne to the Duke, all I can say is that they are too stupid to deserve the franchise at all."

It is to be hoped that a more statesmanlike view of the situation was taken by Hurstbourne's

eminent guests; although, from certain remarks which they allowed to fall, I gathered that Mr Somers, with his indiscreet utterances as to the Established Church, the hereditary branch of the legislature and the principle of one man one vote, did not command their entire sympathy. Before the election day they all left us. They had done everything that they could do—they had talked themselves hoarse—their presence could render no further service to the cause, and some of them had engagements elsewhere, while others proposed to seek a little well-earned rest in their own homes. So they departed, after assuring their entertainer of their hearty good wishes, and receiving in return the thanks which were their due.

As soon as the last of them had driven away, Hurstbourne, with a beaming countenance, came skipping into the room which had been appropriated by Lady Charles as a boudoir.

“Hooray!” he shouted; “now let’s all of us stand on our heads!”

He suited the action to the word, and made me do the same, notwithstanding my protesta-

tions. I hope it is not necessary for me to add that our example was not followed by the two remaining members of the quartette; but I dare say three of us were really very thankful for our deliverance. Lady Charles, I believe, liked company, and derived enjoyment from rubbing shoulders with distinguished persons.

But if we were inclined to be a trifle uproarious, now that we were once more left to ourselves and could speak before we thought, instead of thinking before we spoke, a very effectual damper was in store for our too exuberant spirit. We all stayed at home on the polling day: we had been advised to do so, and we recognised the wisdom of the advice; for, after all, it does not beseem a duke and his immediate circle to descend from the serene heights on which they dwell into the turmoil of a contested election. But, of course, arrangements had been made for acquainting us with the result at the earliest possible moment, and very sad were the tidings conveyed to us by a mounted messenger. Anybody can account for a victory—it is to be

accounted for by the straightforward and satisfactory assumption that the majority of the electors are intelligent men—but when one is called upon to explain away a defeat, a rather larger supply of ingenuity has to be brought into play. For the next few days I made a careful study of the London newspapers, and I gathered, after perusing many leading articles, that the return of Mr Gascoigne by a majority of over eight hundred was chiefly due to the ill-advised interference of the young Duke of Hurstbourne. No constituency—so these learned scribes appeared to have discovered—likes being dictated to; no honest Englishman is apt to be predisposed in favour of a Radical who pledges himself to support a Tory administration; a contest of the kind which had just been witnessed ought never to have taken place at all, and if the juvenile nobleman who had exerted himself so ostentatiously in promoting the candidature of Mr Somers, had been a little older and a little more experienced, he would have thrown the weight of his influence, such as it was, into the scale on his cousin's be-

half. That is the sort of gratitude that one obtains from one's friends when one has been beaten.

I don't think Hurstbourne was greatly disheartened or distressed by the comments of the press; but he did not affect to deny that Paul Gascoigne's triumph was a heavy blow to him.

"That beggar has got first blood," said he; "there's no disputing that. He's very much mistaken if he thinks I shall throw up the sponge, though. We'll do better at the next election, and in the meantime he won't trample me under foot without a fight for it, I can tell him."

"Never," declared Lady Charles, who was highly incensed, "will we receive that man or speak to him again. He deserves to be cut by the head of the family, and cut he shall be."

Nora, though not less angry, was a good deal less silly.

"You mustn't let him think that you feel in the least sore," said she; "the best plan would be to ask him to dinner and congratulate him and pat him on the back. He has secured a seat in Parliament—much good may it do him! Who, except a few really clever people, cares

to spend the best part of the year listening to dreary debates in a stuffy chamber, filled with vulgar nobodies? Parliament isn't everything, and out of Parliament I should think Mr Gascoigne was about the easiest man in England to put to confusion. He poisons foxes, he doesn't play cricket, he isn't much of a shot, and I haven't yet met a single individual who pretends to like him personally. Just let him try to trample upon his betters, that's all.

Hurstbourne considered this a very spirited speech on Nora's part. He told me so afterwards, adding that he believed my sister was as shrewd a woman as his mother, which he meant for a high compliment. He did not detect any shrewdness at all in my recommendation that he should leave his cousin alone; he was unable to see the slightest point in my allusion to brazen and earthenware vessels, he said he was a peaceable creature, but that if people chose to tread on his toes, they must take the consequences. He was, in a word, so evidently bent upon having his revenge, by hook or by crook, that it was useless to reason with

him. Were this world inhabited only by the male variety of the species, we should, doubtless, be spared an infinity of worry, not to mention occasional catastrophes; but we have been created male and female, and, like the unwary persons who tread upon Hurstbourne's toes, I suppose we must accept the consequences of our embarrassing position.

CHAPTER VIII.

BREAKERS AHEAD.

ON looking back at the concluding paragraph of the previous chapter, I see that I have permitted myself therein to speak of the female sex in terms which may seem to imply that I am not alive to the nature of woman's beneficent mission upon the surface of this planet. But I really did not mean to be rude when I wrote the words, and should any lady do me the honour to peruse the present narrative (as it seems not improbable that a few will) I would venture to appeal to that lady's kindness and sympathy not to be too hard upon me. She will, I know, admit that women, and especially young women, require to be managed by women; with her quick intelligence she will at once guess why the memory of bygone irritation and perplexity caused me to express myself irritably; of course,

too, she will have seen, ere this, something which, I solemnly declare that I never dreamt of until circumstances forced a most distressing conjecture upon me. And if I may now be permitted, like a parson in those churches where the men sit on one side of the aisle and the women on the other, to turn to the male section of my readers, I hope that they also will feel for me, though, perhaps, it would be unreasonable to expect that they should acquit me of stupidity. There is, no doubt, always a possibility, almost a probability, that, when a young man and a young woman are thrown together from morning to night in a country house, they will end by falling in love with one another. I quite allow that; only I do think it was excessively improbable that the Duke of Hurstbourne should fall in love with my sister, or she with him. It was so absolutely out of the question that anything could come of it if they did, and so natural to assume that they must both be thoroughly aware of that. Moreover, Nora was already betrothed to Mr Burgess, and Hurstbourne knew it.

Nevertheless, I ought to have had my wits about me, and I suppose if I had been a woman I should have had them about me, although I may plead, as some extenuation of my blindness, that Lady Charles Gascoigne's wits appeared to have gone wool-gathering. Lady Charles, I imagine, saw no more danger in her son's intimate companionship with Nora than she would have seen in his making a friend of his grandmother, or of an infant; the one thing which impressed her most powerfully about him was that he was a duke; dukes, it is generally conceded, cannot contract matrimonial alliances with a class far beneath their own, and even if he did indulge in an occasional flirtation with some impossible person, he would be none the worse off for that. I am not sure that, supposing these to have been her sentiments, she would have been wrong, only it was obvious that my point of view was not, and could not be, identical with hers.

So, if the reader pleases, I will write myself down an ass. I suspected nothing; it did not occur to me to attribute Hurstbourne's de-

termination to stay on for a while at the Castle to any other cause than the continuance of the hard weather, which, as he truly said, prevented its being worth any man's while to undertake a journey to Leicestershire; I did not even smell a rat when a thaw came and when he telegraphed for three of his hunters to be despatched from Melton. The fact is that I was very busy and not a little bothered with accounts; I could not often accompany these young people when they begged me to ride or skate with them; and, as they seemed to get on quite comfortably without me, I devoted my attention to my work, and did not always remember to inquire how they had been spending their many hours of leisure. Lady Charles slept a good deal. She was one of those lazy, good-humoured persons who are usually contented so long as those about them are contented, and although an uneventful mode of existence may not have been greatly to her taste, she did not complain of it. Most likely she thought that it would not last long, and that she would soon be removed into circles

where the fascinations of hair-dye and pearl-powder are properly appreciated.

I believe the first thing that gave me a vague sensation of uneasiness—and even then it was but a vague sensation—was Hurstbourne's saying abruptly to me, one evening, that I really ought to insist upon my sister's engagement being broken off.

"It's utterly monstrous, you know," said he; "it can't be allowed to go on; and the sooner that old bloke is told so, the better, in my opinion."

I replied that it scarcely came within the range of my privileges to convey the suggested information to the old bloke, but that, as I had already mentioned, I was not without hope of that information being imparted to him sooner or later by one more directly interested in the matter than I was.

"Oh, it's all very fine to throw the whole responsibility upon your sister," returned Hurstbourne rather angrily, "but you know as well as I do that she hates the man, and that she would give him the sack to-morrow if

she wasn't afraid of becoming a burden upon you."

"Upon my honour, I don't know that," I answered. "How do you know it, pray?"

He said he had heard it from her own lips—which, I confess, startled me; for, considering that Nora had not for a long time past so much as mentioned Mr Burgess's name to me, it did seem strange that she should have made a confidant of a mere acquaintance. However, he dispelled my nascent apprehensions by dwelling upon her unselfishness and by a repetition of his statement that she was afraid of burdening me with the expense of her maintenance.

"Which is utter nonsense," he added; "because, as long as you remain here, she won't cost you a penny. You needn't tell me, my dear old chap, that you wouldn't grudge her every penny you possess; that's a matter of course. Only you must see that she can't very well take the first step; it's for you to do that."

Was it for me to kick the reverend gentleman into space? I was unable to think so, much as I should have enjoyed the task, and I assured

my friend that I could not, without due authorisation, assume such a responsibility.

"I told you long ago," said I, "that I abhorred this engagement; but I am not entitled to forbid it, and unless Nora breaks it off of her own accord, as I hope she will, I can do nothing."

"Oh, bosh!" he returned impatiently; "there's no doubt about her wishing to break it off. All you have to do is to show a little sympathy and—and encouragement, don't you know?"

I did not take his advice. I said to myself that Nora would certainly come to me as soon as she had made up her mind, and perhaps I was not altogether pleased with Hurstbourne's intervention, although, as I said before, his words only caused me a temporary uneasiness. During the next few days I confidently expected my sister to apply to me for counsel and consolation, and she disappointed me by doing nothing of the sort. Indeed, I scarcely saw her; for when she was not out riding with Hurstbourne, she was playing billiards or otherwise amusing herself with him. There was

nothing that I could detect at all resembling a flirtation between them; they were more like a couple of children than two grown-up people. At luncheon and at dinner they engaged in a perpetual squabble, to which Lady Charles and I listened with benevolent amusement; she criticised his horsemanship, while he did his best to get a rise out of her by pretending to doubt her knowledge of the subject under discussion; sometimes he was successful and chuckled gleefully over his success, sometimes she managed to provoke him into vainglorious boastings; it all sounded quite silly and harmless.

So I went back to my figures, which, with all the pains that I bestowed upon them, could not be made to work out to my satisfaction, and reflected, foolishly enough, that sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. The chief evil of those days, from Hurstbourne's point of view, was that they were non-hunting days. It was not, to be sure, actually freezing; but the frost had gone deep into the ground, meets were not yet advertised, and there were many

signs that the partial thaw which had set in was not going to last long. One night the wind veered to the east of north; the next morning we woke to find our windows coated with ice, and then there was nothing left for a poor fox-hunter to do but to curse the climate of his native land and inquire disconsolately what had become of his skates.

"His Grace," said Lady Charles to me, with her comical little air of condescension, "is wonderfully good at accommodating himself to circumstances. You may imagine how tedious it must be to him to go on living in this humdrum way—removed from all his friends and all his amusements; but he never grumbles, as other men would, and, whatever his feelings may be, he contrives to hide them."

In common justice to him, it must be admitted that he hid them very well indeed. Any uninformed person would have supposed that he was enjoying himself immensely, notwithstanding the severe shakings which he received from his daily falls upon the ice; and, when his mother disinterestedly proposed that they

should run up to London for a week, and see the new plays, he looked quite dismayed.

"London in an east wind!" he exclaimed in a tone of pained remonstrance. "Oh, I don't think that would be good enough—I don't really! Why, there would be such dense fogs that we shouldn't be able to stir out of doors all day long; and as for the plays, they're utter rot. You can see that for yourself in the papers. Of course, if you *want* to go, mother, we'll go; but I don't believe you would like it when you were there, and goodness knows how long it will be before I get another opportunity of proving to Miss Martyn that, with a little practice, I can do all the figures that she is for ever bragging about."

"I wasn't thinking of myself," answered good-natured Lady Charles; "I was only afraid that you must be getting bored to death here. If you aren't, so much the better."

"Oh, I'm all right," Hurstbourne declared, with a prompt brightening of face and tone. "I shouldn't like our friend Paul to think that he had driven me out of the county like a beaten

cur. Besides, I'd really rather be here than anywhere else. Skating isn't hunting; but it does well enough to fill up the time when there's no other sport to be had, and it's better than totting up sums in addition all day long, anyhow. Now, look here, Martyn, you must come down to the lake with us this afternoon and get a little healthy exercise. I believe half the time, when you pretend to be so busy, you're only writing sonnets, or something of that sort."

A modest blush suffused my cheeks, for I did feel that, however communicative Nora might have seen fit to be respecting her own affairs, she ought to have respected her brother's secrets; but she looked as if she did not know what Hurstbourne meant, and I thought I wouldn't pursue the topic. I said I would run down to the ice in the course of the afternoon, if I could manage it; but that, without any humbug, I had an awful lot of work on hand.

My excuse was accepted. Perhaps, after all, my company was not so very ardently desired; and, soon afterwards, I was free to grapple

once more with those daily labours in the discharge of which I received no assistance from the only person who could have rendered them lighter or more hopeful for me. To cut your coat according to your cloth is an excellent plan; but what size or shape of coat can be cut when you are ignorant of the quantity of cloth at your disposal? What bothered me was that, although I had pretty well ascertained the amount of my employer's income, actual and prospective, I had no means of discovering more than a certain proportion of his expenditure. He had already slightly overdrawn his banking account. I did not like to ask him whether I was correct in my suspicion that he had borrowed money from less trustworthy and more expensive gentlemen than the family bankers. Nevertheless, I resolved, that same afternoon, that I would risk his displeasure by putting the above inquisitorial question to him. Unless I did so, and unless he answered me candidly, my services would be scarcely worth the price he was paying for them; so that, when I closed my books and took my skates

in my hand, I saw quite clearly the path marked out for me by the finger of duty—which is always a comforting mental position to have reached.

I was crossing the park at a slinging trot, planning as I went how I would lead Hurstbourne aside and stretch him on the rack without further delay, when I met my proposed victim, who was running as hard as he could in the opposite direction, and who, on catching sight of me, pulled up. He was breathless and much agitated.

“Your sister has had an accident, Martyn,” said he hurriedly; “you’ll find her in the boat-house. I hope it isn’t serious; but I don’t know, and I’m going back to the Castle to send for the doctor. Some infernal tinker ran full tilt against her and knocked her over. She was sensible when I left her, so there’s no concussion of the brain, I trust; only, I’m afraid there must be a broken bone, because she seemed to be suffering so much. Go to her, and have her carried up to the house if you think she can stand it—I mustn’t stop. That fool of a doctor

was there, skating, yesterday when nobody wanted him. Why the deuce couldn't he be there to-day? Just like him. Well, I must run on."

He was out of sight before I had time to ask for further particulars; but, indeed, it was plain that I should obtain speedier information from the evidence of my own senses than I was likely to get out of him. It did not take me long to reach the boat-house, where I found Nora lying upon a pile of cloaks and overcoats, and surrounded by a dismayed and sympathetic throng. She was pale and seemed to be in a good deal of pain, but I perceived at once, to my great relief, that her brain was uninjured, and as soon as she saw me, she tried, without very much success, to summon up a laugh.

"Don't look so horrified, Phil," said she, "I'm not killed this time. I had all the breath knocked out of me, and I have bumped the back of my head, and I rather think I have broken my arm; but I'm quite capable of walking home, if they would let me."

It appeared to me that she might, at any rate,

be carried home out of the cold, and I was making preparations for doing this when, by good luck, the doctor, who had come as usual to seek a little recreation after his daily rounds, arrived upon the scene.

“What’s all this?” asked the burly little red-headed man. “Been coming to grief, Miss Martyn? Not through any want of skill on your own part then, I’m quite sure.”

A tall, melancholy-looking youth, upon whom the eyes of the rest of the assemblage were fixed in severe condemnation, confessed almost tearfully that he had been the unintentional cause of the disaster. He protested with pathetic earnestness that he wished he had broken both his legs before he had been so clumsy; but his repentance met with scant acknowledgment from the doctor, who interrupted him by remarking curtly that if he hadn’t anything more sensible to say than that, he had better take himself off. The other bystanders were not much more civilly dealt with. They were requested to go outside, and stay there until their assistance was asked for; after which there was a brief examina-

tion of the patient, followed by a satisfactory verdict.

"No great damage done," said the doctor, who was kneeling beside my sister, and who glanced round to nod reassuringly at me; "only a shaking and a few contusions and a dislocated shoulder, which I'll put right in a minute. Now, Miss Martyn, I'm not going to hurt you very much; but whether I hurt you or not, you'll have to bear it. Just give me your hand, will you?"

He kicked off his boot, placed his foot under her arm-pit, and, with one vigorous tug, the operation was accomplished.

"There," said he. "Now, we must take you home and put you to bed; you have had more of a shock than you think for; but you'll find it out to-morrow, and you'll be pretty stiff for a day or two, I can tell you. Lucky it was no worse. That young gaby was trying to skate backwards, I suppose. Well, he won't attempt to do such a thing again, unless he has the whole of the lake to himself, you may be sure. It isn't likely that he will be allowed to forget to-day's performance."

As a matter of fact, I believe that the poor young man never has been allowed to forget it. In quiet rural neighbourhoods the memory of all performances, whether good or bad, is apt to die hard, and public indignation had been powerfully aroused by this mishap to a lady who, as I think I have mentioned before, had known how to make herself popular. However, we did all we could to convince him that we bore no malice; Nora insisted upon sending for him before we took her home, in order that he might see for himself how little she had suffered from an unavoidable collision; even Hurstbourne, whom we encountered on our way back, and who expressed extreme joy on finding that his apprehensions had been exaggerated, went so far as to promise that he would not break the stupid idiot's head.

I should not be telling the truth, were I to deny that I myself felt a strong inclination, in the course of the same evening, to break the head of another stupid idiot, and that that head was placed above the shoulders of his Grace the Duke of Hurstbourne. Of course his conduct had been due to mere stupidity and idiocy;

of course he had no serious intentions; of course he would have been horrified at the idea of breaking a rustic maiden's heart for his amusement; and, of course, two-thirds of the cruelty that is committed in this world is unintentional cruelty. That is just the provoking part of it.

Nora was put to bed as soon as we reached the Castle, and Lady Charles fussed round her in the kindest possible way, and everything was done to make her comfortable. She was going to be all right in a day or two; only in the meantime her nervous system had been upset; and I suppose that was why she informed me abruptly, while I was sitting beside her and endeavouring to interest her in the latest intelligence conveyed to us by the evening papers, that she had determined to throw over Mr Burgess. Immediately after making this announcement she burst into tears, which distressed and alarmed me; because crying is not, as a general rule, one of her weaknesses. I could only say (for I was reluctant to agitate her more than I could help) that I was very glad to hear it, and that I saw no reason for her distressing

herself about a thoroughly sensible resolution; but, as she didn't stop weeping, I inquired presently whether she had any cause for unhappiness beyond that which she had mentioned.

"None whatever," she answered. "It makes me feel rather like a brute, and it leaves me as a dead weight upon your hands, that's all. Still I can't help it. I don't love him, and I can't possibly marry him. You yourself told me once, Phil, that it was shameful to marry a man whom one doesn't love."

I assured her that I had no inclination at all to recede from an opinion which I had always held, and which I continue to hold to the present day.

"But," I ventured to add, "it isn't, I suppose, out of deference to my views that you have so suddenly changed your own. Hurstbourne told me, the other day, that you had been speaking to him about your engagement, and no doubt he has dissuaded you from keeping it. That is all very well; only Hurstbourne, you know, good fellow though he is, is not precisely one whose advice it would always be safe to follow blindly."

At this Nora began to laugh.

"Oh," said she, "the Duke is a goose and you are wise; nobody knows that better than he does. All the same, it does occasionally come to pass that wisdom proceeds out of the mouth of fools."

"Is it his wisdom or his folly that leads you to discuss subjects with him upon which you decline to enter with your brother?" I asked sternly.

I looked at her, hoping against hope that she would not blush; but she did blush; so I picked up the evening paper again, with a heavy heart, and read out scraps of fashionable intelligence which were probably as unmeaning to her as they were to me. She had virtually told me all that there was to tell; I could not expect, or even wish, that she should be more explicit.

CHAPTER IX.

MISS ST GEORGE.

NORA was soon herself again. She had been mentally as well as physically upset, and she had said things which she may possibly have regretted when her nervous system recovered its customary equilibrium; but she had quite made up her mind to renounce the care of Mr Burgess and his children. In assuring me of her unaltered resolution she, nevertheless, took occasion to beg that I would say nothing about it for the present.

"There is no hurry," said she; "Mr Burgess, as you know, isn't in a hurry, and of course my private affairs don't concern anybody here except you and me."

"Most certainly they don't," I replied, with an emphasis of the futility of which I was fully aware. "It can't signify a straw to Lady Charles Gascoigne whether you marry this or that person

or whether you remain a spinster; as for Hurstbourne, he is a simple, kind-hearted fellow, and I can well understand that he may have been shocked at the idea of your engaging yourself to a man of Mr Burgess's age; but I am afraid he will forget your existence and mine as soon as we are out of his sight, and his own affairs, you may be sure, interest him a hundred times more than yours—which, after all, is only natural."

"You do the Duke an injustice," said Nora; "he doesn't forget you when you are out of his sight. He looks upon you as his best friend, and I don't think he is very far wrong."

Then she laughed, and inquired whether, by any chance, I imagined that she had lost her heart to this appreciative scion of the British aristocracy.

I avoided giving a direct answer. I was under no illusion upon the subject; but I had sense enough to see that the mischief had passed beyond the range of verbal correctives. What course it behoved me to take, and what course our mother would have taken, had she been

situated as I was, I could not tell ; but it seemed to me best to promise that I would keep Nora's secret and to adopt every possible precaution for preventing further private intercourse between her and Hurstbourne. I can't say for certain, but I rather suspect that, during the ensuing ten days, they both of them found me a persistent and intolerable nuisance. They behaved very well about it; they professed, and even appeared, to be delighted with the companionship which I so ruthlessly thrust upon them; they never inquired how it was that I had such a superfluity of leisure upon my hands all of a sudden; there was not, properly speaking, the smallest flirtation between them when I joined in their games of billiards, or when, a genuine thaw having at last set in, I attended them in the hunting-field. Yet, watching them narrowly, I perceived by a thousand little signs that my fears rested upon only too solid a foundation and that the worst that could happen had happened. The worst, I mean, as regarded the existence of a calamity which I was powerless to avert or minimise; of course, a much

worse time was in store for poor Nora; for, whereas she was now ridiculously happy, it was beyond doubt that she would ere long be quite as ridiculously, but not less thoroughly, miserable. And all this because a well-meaning young man, with a rather handsome face, had not vanity enough to preserve him from making havoc of the future of a girl to whom he had taken a passing fancy. I feel confident that everyone who reads these lines will excuse me for having snapped viciously at him every now and then, without ostensible cause for so doing, and will agree that he ought not, in all conscience, to have looked so surprised and hurt when he was snapped at.

Well, I daresay he became less dense later on; but whether he did, or whether he didn't, the inevitable had to occur. One morning there was a lawn-meet at the house of a neighbouring squire which was patronised by all the great people of the county, together with their wives, their families, their horses and their carriages. Amongst the latter I speedily recognised the equipage which had been sent to the station

to meet Mr Paul Gascoigne on the day when he had so thoughtfully put our noses out of joint by ordering postillions. If I did not at once recognise one of the ladies who sat in it, facing its owner, that was because she was about the last person in the world whom I should have expected to encounter in such a place, or on such an occasion.

But Nora, who was close beside me, touched my elbow with her hunting crop, exclaiming, not without a perceptible inflection of alarm in her voice,—

“Good gracious, Phil, there’s Lady Deverell!” And sure enough, the forefinger and the hook nose of the venerable lady began presently to convey to us signals which it was impossible to disregard.

Her ladyship, so we were informed after we had approached and had exchanged greetings with her and with the newly elected M.P., was staying for a short time at Lavenham. She was accompanied by her niece, Miss St George, to whom she was graciously pleased to introduce us, and who, I thought, took somewhat unnecessary pains to

show us what very small fry we were in her estimation. Miss St George was a very tall young lady. Her large, dark eyes only rested upon me superciliously for a single moment; yet, such is my calm impartiality that I was ready to acknowledge at the time, as I am ready to acknowledge now, the fact of her being singularly beautiful. I don't say that I admired her, that is quite another thing. There is no law that I know of which compels free-born Britons to admire beauty when they see it, and if my taste is bad, it is, nevertheless, my taste, and will remain such.

For about five minutes I listened with one ear to the fluent political commonplaces and the ill-disguised political exultation of Mr Paul Gascoigne, while with the other I caught fragments of the kindly lecture which Lady Deverell was addressing to my sister.

"You really must not ask me to approve of it, my dear," I heard her saying; "hunting cannot be considered a suitable amusement for the future wife of a parish priest. As for sport in the abstract, there is much to be said in favour

of its being supported by those whose means and position entitle them to engage in it. Mr Gascoigne, as I daresay you know, is a sportsman himself and an excellent shot; but he has far too deep a sense of his responsibilities to give up his life to sport, as his cousin does. Though, to be sure, I understand that when the present Duke of Hurstbourne is not engaged in sport, he is usually even worse employed."

At that moment the present Duke of Hurstbourne rode up and joined us, thereby, perhaps, preserving a friend of his from speaking unadvisedly with her lips. He greeted his cousin pleasantly—Hurstbourne can't help being pleasant, except when he means to be downright rude—he was introduced to Lady Deverell, who bowed in a very distant and stately fashion, and I noticed that Miss St George's languid eyes brightened a little as she acknowledged his salutation. How queer it is that the stupidest and most unobservant people sometimes discover, by a sort of inspiration, things which have not even happened yet, but which are certainly going to happen. I know it is so, because I can speak from personal

experience, but I cannot account for the fact, nor have I the slightest idea why I was persuaded, before Miss St George had exchanged a dozen words with Hurstbourne, that she intended to set her cap at him. I overheard all, or nearly all, that they said to one another; nothing could have been more innocent or more dull. It was a good job, he remarked, that that beastly frost had gone at last; she assented, and, in reply to a question of his, confessed that she was fond of riding. She added that she did sometimes hunt, but that she had not put on her riding-habit that day, because it had not been suggested to her that she should do so, and because she had been given to understand that Mr Gascoigne was not a hunting man.

“More’s the pity,” observed Hurstbourne: whereupon she shrugged her shoulders and held her peace.

I think there was a pause after that, or if any further observations were exchanged between them, they were drowned by the deep voice of Lady Deverell, who had resumed her interrupted homily to my sister. The next words from Hurstbourne’s

lips which caught my ear were of a kind which reflected credit upon him and gave evidence of conciliatory and neighbourly inclinations on his part. He was calling his cousin "old chap," and was inviting the whole party to come over and lunch some day. There wouldn't be anything for them to do, he said; but, perhaps, they might like to see the place, and if Lady Deverell or Miss St George cared at all about flowers, he could show them a pretty fair display, considering the time of year. "No swagger orchids, such as I suppose you have at Lavenham; still, a decent amount of ordinary stove and greenhouse plants, you know."

The invitation was accepted. Mr Gascoigne's manner implied that he was always happy to confer a favour upon a poor relation; Lady Deverell's was that of an austere saint, who knows that for her there can be no risk in visiting the haunts of profligacy, while Miss St George was almost effusive in her gratitude.

"Oh, thank you so much!" she exclaimed. "I have always longed to see Hurstbourne Castle, which everybody says is one of the

finest places in England; but I didn't like to ask Mr Gascoigne to take us there as sight-seers while you were at home."

On our way towards the covert-side, Hurstbourne caught me up and said,—

"That's an awfully good-looking girl."

"Yes," I replied; "she is very good-looking indeed. I doubt whether she is anything more."

"Oh, you be hanged," returned Hurstbourne laughing; "you're an old St—what's his name—Anthony, wasn't it? Pretty faces don't appeal to you, you must needs have mental beauty; whereas everybody else, including our esteemed friend Paul, knows that if a woman isn't physically attractive, she has missed her vocation. I don't suppose you noticed anything; but I'll lay you two to one in whatever you like that Paul has lost his heart to that Miss St George."

I did not take his offer; because, for one thing, I can't afford to bet, and, for another, he was mistaken in his assumption that I had noticed nothing. On the contrary, I had noticed that Mr Gascoigne had not half liked his guest's

gracious reception of the young Duke, and that he had made several vain attempts to break in upon their brief and harmless colloquy. However, I did not care no mention this; I only said,—

“Well, if he has lost his heart to her, by all means let him marry her. I shall not forbid the banns, nor, I presume, will you; and if appearances are to be relied upon, they ought to make a remarkably well-suited couple.”

Hurstbourne gave a sort of snort and left me. I knew just what the state of his mind was; I knew perfectly well that he would like to forbid the banns if he could. I knew that he had been a little bit fascinated and that he had a very strong desire to cut his cousin out in any way that might seem to lie open to him. I couldn't help it, though. I could only hold my tongue, and wish that I hadn't been such an ass as to bring my poor dear Nora to Hurstbourne Castle, and wonder what Providence could be about to let things fall out so askew, without the faintest apparent prospect of advantage to the persons concerned.

My mother used to be fond of affirming that the designs of Providence are beyond our comprehension. Everything leads me to believe that she was right.

We had a blank day, which was possibly the reason why we all three returned home out of spirits and out of temper. Other causes may have been at work; but I can't say for certain, because, of course, I don't know what passed between Hurstbourne and Nora after I lost sight of them. The latter, when I rejoined her on the homeward path, had some harsh things to say about Lady Deverell, the justice of which I felt to be indisputable, and consequently did not attempt to dispute; but she cordially — almost too cordially — concurred in Hurstbourne's outspoken admiration of Miss St George, and I daresay he was more surprised than I was by the uncalled-for way in which she snubbed him when he said cheerfully,—

“Well, Miss Nora, we've wasted our time and our patience to-day, haven't we? But never mind; we'll have better luck next Saturday. Of course you'll come out on Saturday.”

"I think not," she replied; "it's hardly good enough. If one has a chance of being shown any sport, one can submit to sermons from Lady Deverell and to hours of improving conversation with — with other people, but this doesn't seem to be a very sporting county."

I don't think anybody would accuse Hurstbourne of being a bad-tempered man; but he is certainly rather short in the temper, and he is young. So, instead of asking Nora point-blank what was the matter with her (which would have driven her into a corner), he raised his chin an inch and a half and looked huffy. Altogether, it was scarcely one of those days which deserve to be marked with a white stone.

What sort of a stone ought to have marked the day on which Mr Gascoigne, accompanied by his fair visitors, came to partake of luncheon with us, I can't pretend to decide. Such questions depend, of course, upon the point of view of the individual who holds the stone; and if, on that occasion, I had held a stone in my hand and had possessed perfect freedom of action, I really don't know whether I should have hurled

the missile at Paul Gascoigne's head, or at Lady Deverell's, or at Miss St George's — they were all of them, in their several ways, so extremely disagreeable. However, I take it that Hurstbourne did not find Miss St George disagreeable, whatever may have been his opinion with regard to the two others.

It was with the two others that Nora and I and poor Lady Charles had to deal. I don't mind admitting now that they got the better of us; because there are, after all, certain contests in which it is more honourable to be vanquished than to conquer, and although it may be that we should have said as many nasty things as they did, if we had been clever enough and rude enough, I am sure we consulted our own dignity by remaining strictly on the defensive. Lady Deverell, who was an honest woman, insulted us all pretty openly. She appeared to have a violent prejudice against Hurstbourne; she despised Lady Charles; she was displeased with Nora, and she had always, I believe, regarded me as being three-fourths of a fool and a quarter of a knave. Her observa-

tions were not agreeable ; still they were not as offensive as those of Mr Gascoigne, who, while maintaining a perfectly polite and urbane demeanour, contrived, by various more or less adroit insinuations, to goad us into a condition bordering upon fury.

Yet, as will have been surmised from my statement that these charming persons were left to be entertained by three of our number, there were excuses for Mr Gascoigne. It could not have been pleasant to him to see Hurstbourne lead Miss St George off to the conservatories immediately after luncheon ; he could not, I am sure, have liked the young lady's persistent deafness to his hints that he, too, would be glad to inspect the exotics ; and by taking his revenge upon unoffending persons, he was perhaps only doing what it is human and natural to do. I can't say that I liked him well enough to be sorry for him ; but I endeavoured to make allowances, and I abstained from inviting him to explain himself when he gave us to understand that his cousin had become mixed up with a disreputable gang of racing men.

"Racing," said he, "is a national pastime which tends, no doubt, to improve the breed of horses throughout the country. It is quite right that it should be supported; only I should never advise any man to engage in it unless he could afford to do so *en grand seigneur*."

"His Grace," observed Lady Charles, "would always do that."

Thereupon Mr Gascoigne laughed a little and inquired whether his Grace was a millionaire. "Only millionaires," he was good enough to inform us, "can race without betting, and only people who don't mind losing their money can bet without involving themselves in transactions which a *grand seigneur* would feel to be impossible for him."

I hardly know how he managed to convey to us the impression that, in his opinion, Hurstbourne's position was absurdly incompatible with that of a *grand seigneur*; but such was the impression that he did convey, and he conveyed several others, equally unflattering, into the bargain; so it was no wonder that, after a time, a fine natural colour asserted itself through Lady

Charles's powder and rouge, or that Nora affected to be interested in the contents of a book which she had snatched up at random from the table.

Those plants seemed to require a great deal of examination. I believe that I am guilty of no exaggeration when I say that a good solid hour had elapsed before Lady Deverell lost patience and requested that a servant might be despatched in search of her niece.

"Leila is a most good-natured girl," said she; "but I doubt whether she knows anything at all about botany, and I really think she has been victimised long enough. Besides, it is high time for us to be going."

Mr Gascoigne rose with alacrity, and offered to start in quest of the truants; but Lady Charles said we would all go, and the upshot of it was that we all went. Through the conservatories we trooped, a grim and silent phalanx, Lady Charles leading the way and the rest of us following; we visited the palm-house and the intermediate houses, and the hothouses and even the stove-house where the big Farleyense is: but nowhere were we rewarded by a sign or

a trace of our quarry. At last somebody—the humble writer of these lines, perhaps—put forward a timid suggestion that it might be worth while to try the stables; and in the stable-yard, sure enough, we found Hurstbourne and Miss St George, seated upon a couple of inverted buckets, and conversing as unconcernedly as if nothing had been further from their thoughts than that they had for some time past been causing five respectable persons to use inward language quite unfit for publication respecting them. Hurstbourne was smoking a cigar, and looked, as I have no doubt he felt, perfectly contented.

“Oh, there you all are!” he said, as we hove in sight; “we were just wondering what had become of you.”

One or two of us—I was one—responded by a feeble sort of giggle; but Lady Deverell is not given to giggling when she is angry.

“What are you dreaming of to sit out of doors in this cold air, Leila?” she asked. “I understood the Duke to say that he wished to show you the conservatories; though I might have guessed that he would be more at home

with grooms than with gardeners. I don't know at what hour you ordered the carriage, Mr Gascoigne ; but unless we start at once, we certainly shall not reach Lavenham before nightfall."

Mr Gascoigne went off to look for his coachman, while Miss St George, who did not appear to be much in awe of her aunt, explained that she was not in the least cold, and that she agreed with the Duke of Hurstbourne in preferring horses to flowers.

"You won't forget your promise of coming over some day to inspect your cousin's stud, will you?" she added turning to her host. "As I told you, it isn't much of a stud, because he isn't a hunting man; still, he has one or two animals that you might care to run your eye over, and, if it won't be troubling you too much, I should like you just to try that mare of his which he says can carry a lady."

To an unprejudiced listener this sounded pretty cool; but Hurstbourne seemed to think it all right, and declared, with a foolish air of gratification which made me long to wring his neck, that he would not for the world allow Miss St George

to mount any animal without having previously ascertained that it was fit for her to ride. What Mr Gascoigne may have thought must remain a matter of conjecture, but when he returned to us he seconded the invitation which had been given in his name with a tolerably good grace. One should always try to allow the devil his due, and if I can't find anything else to say in favour of Paul Gascoigne, I am at least willing to admit that he possesses the gift of self-command.

It was not until some minutes after our guests had departed that Lady Charles interrupted her son's warm encomiums upon Miss St George's beauty and amiability by remarking,—

“My dear Arthur, she may be this, that or the other; but if she were staying in my house, I shouldn't like her to make herself so much at home. The idea of her asking you to go over to Lavenham, and of that long-legged gaby submissively backing her up. He hadn't even the civility to ask me either.”

“Oh,” answered Hurstbourne, looking a trifle disconcerted, “I am sure they would have asked

you, mother, if they had thought you would care to go."

"*They*," retorted Lady Charles, with a toss of her flaxen head; "who are *they*, pray? I was under the impression that Lavenham belonged to Paul Gascoigne. Not, of course, that it ought to belong to him, and not that I should think of troubling myself to drive all that distance for the privilege of seeing his unpleasant face again and listening to his unpleasant talk. Nor, I sincerely hope, will you do so, Arthur."

Well, it was probably not for the sake of the privileges mentioned that Hurstbourne intended to go there, and did go there. I was more than doubtful whether his incentive was even the totally inadequate one which he was pleased to confide to me later in the evening.

"I rather flatter myself that I put Master Paul's nose out of joint a bit to-day," said he, with a mischievous chuckle. "He isn't engaged to Miss St George yet, and it's not quite a thousand to one certainty that he ever will be. It does that chap a lot of good to let him see that he isn't absolutely invincible."

“But are you so very anxious to do him good?” I ventured to inquire. “I thought you weren’t particularly fond of him. If you were, one might understand your sitting upon a stable bucket and playing with fire. Doesn’t it strike you that, if you don’t mind what you are about, you may find yourself engaged to Miss St George one of these fine days? And don’t you think that, in that case, Mr Gascoigne might have the laugh on his side?”

Hurstbourne answered, “Oh, bosh!” and went out of the room. He has a happy knack of leaving the room when he can’t hit upon a rational rejoinder.

CHAPTER X.

SOMETHING LIKE A DAY.

HURSTBOURNE, as I have said, went over to Lavenham in spite of his mother; some more definite invitation than that which he had received in my hearing, must, I suppose, have reached him by post. Anyhow, he went, and, for my part, I tried to persuade myself that it was just as well that he should go. Miss St George or another, what did it matter? Sooner or later my poor Nora was certain to be ejected from her fool's paradise, and the sooner she was made to submit to that painful process of eviction the sooner her troubles would be over. I may be mistaken, but my impression is that nine people out of ten recover from the pangs of unrequited affection within a year, or, at the outside, eighteen months. It is true that there always remains the case of the tenth person to be considered,

and that is why I was a sorrowful man in those days. Nora might be exceptional; nothing proved to me that she was not so; I could not tell how she was taking it all, and of course I could not ask her. Only I saw, by the heaviness of her eyelids and the pallor of her cheeks, that she was not getting her fair share of sleep, added to which, she assumed a certain hard gaiety of demeanour which was neither natural nor of a nature to deceive anybody less obtuse than Lady Charles Gascoigne.

All the same, it appeared to deceive Hurstbourne, whose attention, no doubt, was otherwise occupied, and who no longer either sought my sister's society or looked as if he missed it. There was no quarrel between them; that little tiff on the way back from hunting, of which mention has been made, had blown over, and they laughed and joked together as usual when they met; but they did not often meet now, except at meals, nor was the cover removed from the billiard-table any more. Hurstbourne returned from his visit to his cousin in high glee.

"What do you think?" said he. "The hounds are to draw the Lavenham coverts on Tuesday, and Paul is going to give a big breakfast. He doesn't half like it, and I believe he is in a blue funk because we have persuaded him that it is his bounden duty to get on a horse for the occasion. However, as we are pretty sure not to find, and as he has some very sober beasts in his stables, there isn't much chance of his getting chucked," added Hurstbourne regretfully.

"Is that girl a good rider?" inquired Lady Charles, with languid interest.

"I don't know; I haven't seen her in the saddle. But I tried that little mare of Paul's, and an uncommonly nice little mare she is. If there's a run, Miss St George ought to be able to see it; anyhow, we'll show her the way, won't we, Miss Martyn?"

"I daresay you will; I shan't have that privilege, because I sha'n't be there," answered Nora.

"Why not?—what nonsense!—what do you mean?" asked Hurstbourne almost angrily.

"Well, I mean, for one thing, that I don't

see the fun of fox-hunting without a fox, and for another thing, that I would rather not be preached at again by Lady Deverell if I could help it. Thirdly and lastly, I should prefer to stay at home. There's no use in arguing with a person who says she would prefer to stay at home."

"I also will stay at home," observed Lady Charles, with a laugh and a yawn; "if Mr Gascoigne wishes for our company, let him have the good manners to ask for it, and then we'll refuse."

Hurstbourne grumbled a little; he could do no less. He said that even if there were no foxes at Lavenham, there would be foxes somewhere in the neighbourhood, and that, supposing the worst came to the worst, it was better to be out in the open air than to sit over the fire all day doing nothing, he should have thought. But he evidently was not particularly keen about Nora's company, and it is superfluous to add that that sad fact was as obvious to her as it was to me. Much to my relief, she did not display her true feel-

ings more undisguisedly than she had already done; though I daresay she might have been painfully explicit without causing that foolish young man to suspect their existence.

The end of it was that I was forced, somewhat against my will, to go with him and see him through. Hurstbourne is one of those good, simple creatures who can't enjoy anything alone and can't understand the failure of other people to enjoy what affords them satisfaction. He must needs always have a friend at his elbow to whom he can impart his joys, his sorrows, his desires and the rest of his ephemeral emotions, and it seemed, for the time being, to be my destiny to fill a part which would not in itself have been distasteful to me. Only, as sympathetic readers will readily realise, I could not, under all the circumstances, precisely relish the prospect of looking on at his philanderings with Miss St George. I am not gifted with that remarkable insight into the thoughts of my fellow creatures which is boldly claimed by such a number of people in these days; so that I really

don't know whether Hurstbourne set forth with the intention of conquering Miss St George's affections or only with that of making his cousin jealous; but certainly, when we arrived at our destination, his behaviour was of a kind to lend support to either hypothesis. We found a great crowd in the dining-room, and met with a cordial reception from everybody, including our host, who was very nicely got up in boots and breeches, but had wisely abstained from donning a pink coat.

"Delighted to see you Arthur," said he. "I hope we shall be able to show you some sport; but, as you know, that is more the keeper's affair than mine. All I can say is that I gave strict orders upon the subject as soon as I succeeded to the property."

"Any man," observed Colonel Corbin, who chanced to be standing near, "can have both foxes and pheasants, if he likes, and any keeper that I ever heard of will kill foxes, if he dares. It's a mere question of whether he has been told that he is to interpret strict orders strictly or not."

Colonel Corbin, it was plain, entertained no sanguine anticipations, and did not think it worth while to conceal his sentiments; but, as lawn-meets are usually attended by plenty of sportsmen to whom sport is a matter of secondary importance, Mr Gascoigne was not, so far as I am aware, distressed by any further speeches of the above uncomplimentary description. He was extremely polite, affable and discursive; no doubt he wished to make himself popular, and to a certain extent he may have been successful. I suppose he could not, for the life of him, have helped being condescending; otherwise he might easily have secured more friends than his money and his position had already earned for him.

He was not, however, so bumptious on that occasion as was his wont; for he was palpably nervous. I saw him mount the big, staid roan horse which had been brought to the door for him; I saw his groom indulge in a grin and a wink when his back was turned; but I also saw in a very few minutes that he had been taught to ride. If Hurstbourne expected him to

go over his horse's head, Hurstbourne was likely to be disappointed. But Hurstbourne was not looking at his rival; he was helping Miss St George into the saddle, and for the next quarter of an hour or more he had no eyes for anybody except Miss St George. That young lady sat well and handled her spirited little mare as if she knew what she was about; of course it remained to be seen whether she was really a horsewoman of Nora's class. Not, to be sure, that that mattered much; still I was, I confess, mean enough to hope that she had not all Nora's pluck. It was disgraceful of me to admit such feelings into my mind; but I did admit them. Perhaps one or two very kind and forgiving people will refrain from condemning a frail fellow-mortal.

And now occurred an unexpected and (as I was subsequently assured) an unprecedented event. We actually found a fox in Lavenham woods. There were, I believe, certain people who affirmed—but no matter! The gossip of the hunting-field is only a shade less contemptible than that of the drawing-room, and, whatever may have

been the antecedents of Mr Gascoigne's unique fox, he proved a game one and gave us a rattling spin of forty minutes. It is to be regretted that the gentleman who had thus done his duty by the hunt so nobly and satisfactorily should, through some unfortunate mishap or other, have been thrown out at the very beginning of the run. I saw nothing of Mr Gascoigne after we got away; but, on the other hand, I saw a good deal of Miss St George, who rode with skill and judgment, and fairly earned the brush which was awarded to her. As much could not be said for Hurstbourne. It is, or was, Hurstbourne's habit to ride upon a system calculated to make the blood of all beholders run cold. Nobody that I ever heard of thinks of disputing his courage; he has a good seat and tolerably good hands; but I firmly believe that if, at that time (he has reasons for behaving less insanely nowadays) he had seen a seven-foot stone wall in front of him, he would have put his horse at it without troubling himself for one moment to consider whether he was attempting an absolute impossibility or not. In that part of the world stone

walls are neither numerous nor lofty, but we had to negotiate some rather awkward fences, and over one of these he managed, in his own words to "come a most superior crowner." Both he and his horse escaped with a shaking; he was soon in the saddle again, and he galloped up in time to witness the finish, with a countenance illuminated by smiles and adorned by two long scratches, as well as by various smears of mud.

Miss St George contemplated him with calm curiosity.

"Have you insured your life?" I heard her inquire.

And when he answered, laughing, that he had neglected that precaution, she returned,—

"Do you know, I don't think I would neglect it any longer, if I were you."

He seemed to accept her observation as a compliment; very likely it may have presented itself to him in that light; and while we were jogging along towards Ringstead Gorse, he was most assiduous in his attentions to her and superlative in his praises of the manner in which she had hitherto acquitted herself. Riding close be-

hind them, I caught occasional fragments of their dialogue which would have convinced me, if indeed any convincing process had been required, that he was making love to Lady Deverell's niece with the uncompromising thoroughness that was wont to characterise every action of his. Lady Deverell's niece appeared to like it, and there was no reason to suppose that Miss St George's aunt would dislike it; because, after all, a duke is a duke, though he may have a cousin wealthier than himself. As for me, it was not to be expected of me that I should like it; nor in truth should I have liked it even if Nora had not, on an ill-starred day, come to take up her abode at Hurstbourne Castle; for, admirably adapted though Miss St George was to adorn the station of a duchess, she did not strike me as being the sort of woman to render a kind-hearted, hot-tempered, matter-of-fact little man happy.

But the great merit of fox-hunting, as of all other sports and pastimes worthy to be so called, is that, while the excitement of it lasts, nothing else signifies one farthing; and there was excite-

ment enough in our second run that day to content the most insatiable of fox-hunters. I am not going to describe that historic run. To begin with, I couldn't possibly do justice to its incidents unless I were to ascend or descend into rhyme (a practice which I have abandoned); added to which, I am sorry to say that I only saw a portion of it. However, I thoroughly enjoyed that portion of it in which I was privileged to take part, and a man whose bones are as big as mine are knows only too well that he must be a Rothschild into the bargain if he wants his horse to stay for ever. My poor old grey floundered into a ditch at last and gave me to understand, after I had got him on to his legs again, that he had shot his bolt. I had not spared him as perhaps I ought to have done, and I was not even sure that he would be able to carry me home.

One thing was beyond all question, and that was that homewards we must set our faces. So, after a brief breathing space, we started at a foot's pace, threading our way through the sinuous and miry lanes, until we arrived at a public-

house, where I thought I had better halt and gruel my exhausted mount. It was almost dark when I hoisted myself once more into the saddle and, catching the sound of approaching hoofs, paused in the hope that some other belated horseman might be able to inform me of the result of the day's sport, or at least to direct me as to the shortest way to Hurstbourne Castle.

However, it was a horsewoman, not a horseman, who presently showed up black against the red glow of the western sky, and as she approached I recognised Miss St George, who drew rein and honoured me with a nod.

"I'm sure I don't know," she said rather crossly, in answer to my first question. "They were still running when I had to leave them, and they looked as if they meant to run until next year. Meanwhile, my mare has dropped lame, and I haven't the most remote idea where I am. I suppose you are acquainted with the geography of this hideous country, aren't you? Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me what point of the compass I ought to make for in order to reach Lavenham before I die."

I was not in a position to furnish her with the required instructions, but I made inquiries of the people at the public-house, who were as voluble and incomprehensible as rustics always are under such circumstances. It was very evident that I should have to see her home, which was not altogether an enchanting prospect, seeing that it behoved me to find my own way home, and that that task was likely to take me all my time. She neither protested nor apologised when I proclaimed my generous intentions; she appeared to think that I could do no less. That is what they generally appear to think, though I am quite at a loss to explain why they should. I concluded, from certain observations which escaped her, after we had started, that she considered Hurstbourne wanting in gallantry, inasmuch as he had not taken more care of her, and this tickled me so much that it helped me to overcome my incipient sulkiness. As if Hurstbourne was the sort of man to cut himself out of a run for any woman upon the face of the earth!

"I am sure," said I gravely, being perfectly

sure of the contrary, "that he would never have left you to take care of yourself if he hadn't been convinced that you were capable of doing that. You must try to forgive him. He probably thought, as I did after seeing you go, that you stood in no need of a pilot."

"I don't require anybody to break my fences for me, if that is what you mean," replied Miss St George; "but I am not ashamed to confess that I can't find my way instinctively about a country which I never saw before in my life and have no wish to see again."

She was so obviously out of temper that she rendered me quite cheerful, in spite of all the good reasons that I had for feeling depressed.

"I am very sorry," said I, "that you don't like this part of the world and don't wish to revisit it. Hurstbourne will be very sorry too, and so, no doubt, will Mr Gascoigne. By the way, Hurstbourne may have imagined that Mr Gascoigne could escort you home, if he could do nothing else for you."

My companion made a half-turn in her saddle and contemplated me with a disdain which, I

daresay, would have withered me if I could have seen it; but as her back was turned to what little light there was left, I was denied the pleasure of scrutinising her features.

"From your way of speaking of him," she said after a pause, "I suppose the Duke is an intimate friend of yours."

"I have been acquainted with him since he was a very small boy," I answered. "That accounts for the lack of deference and respect which seems to have struck you and which would perhaps be only becoming in one of his present subordinates."

She neither resented nor even noticed my snappishness. I was not a sufficiently important person to be worth snubbing; nor, I frankly confess, did I ever succeed in provoking Miss St George, although, during my subsequent intercourse with her, I did more than once try my hand at that foolish and hopeless game.

She remained silent for a few minutes; after which she resumed,—

"As you know him so well, and as, according to Mr Gascoigne, you are employed in managing

his affairs, you probably know whether it is true or not that he is over head and ears in debt."

"What is not only probable, but certain," I observed in reply, "is that, if I were in possession of that knowledge, I should not impart it to a total stranger. But I don't in the least mind telling you that I know very little more about the matter than you do. The Duke of Hurstbourne might be in debt without my being aware of it; he might also have been singularly lucky in his racing ventures without having rendered any account of them to me."

"Has he been lucky?" she inquired, with a touch of eagerness.

"I have said already that I don't know. Perhaps he has, and perhaps he hasn't."

"Well," she remarked in musing accents, after we had ridden on for a short distance, "most likely he hasn't. Still, there's no knowing; it is just possible that he may have a head on his shoulders, though one would hardly suppose so from his style of riding."

"You mean," I suggested, "that his head won't remain on his shoulders much longer if

he continues to rush at his fences in that mad way."

She answered quite seriously,—

"It would be a difficult thing to knock one's head off; but it is as easy as possible to fracture one's skull or break one's neck, and I should say that the Duke was in a fair way to do the one or the other. Of course, if anything should happen to him, Mr Gascoigne would succeed to the title."

I have never met anybody like Miss St George; nor, I should imagine, can there be many people quite so imperturbably and cynically candid. Nora affirms that what puzzles me about the woman is merely her phenomenal stupidity, and that similar manifestations in a man would not surprise me at all. It may be so; but, personally, I am inclined to ascribe rather to supreme contempt for her hearer than to density my companion's open avowal (for really it amounted to nothing less), that she was undecided whether to marry the Duke of Hurstbourne for the sake of his title or to wait a little longer upon the chance of securing

the title and Mr Gascoigne's wealth at one and the same time. She put a great many more questions to me about my patron and friend; she wanted to know whether he was a gambler; whether he had other vices that I knew of; whether the legitimacy of his birth had ever been called in question; what he or his mother had done to incur Lady Deverell's dislike; why his father had been cut by the late Duke, and so forth. I gave her such information as I thought fit, and then, for my own amusement, endeavoured to draw her out upon the subject of Mr Gascoigne; for I thought it would be interesting to hear her frank opinion of that gentleman. But, ready as she was to cross-examine me, she had no notion of being cross-examined in her turn, and she disposed of my modest queries by the simple and effectual method of leaving them unanswered. In fact, she soon ceased to take any notice at all of me. She had, I presume, found out as much as she wanted to hear, or as much as she thought I could tell her, and for at least a couple of miles we rode on,

side by side, in a silence broken only by my perplexed murmurings when we arrived at a sign-post, and when I tried to decipher the half-effaced inscriptions upon it. Thick darkness fell upon us by-and-by. I imagined that we must be somewhere near Lavenham; but I was by no means sure of our whereabouts, so that it was a great relief to me to descry a man on a tired horse ahead of us, and a still greater relief to be hailed by him in Hurstbourne's familiar, cheery voice.

"Hullo, Martyn! is that you?" he called out, as soon as he recognised me. "Who have you got with you? Miss St George, by Jove! Well, and how are you both? Pretty well dead-beat, like the rest of us, eh? We *have* had something like a day, haven't we?"

"I was beginning to be afraid," I remarked, "that we were in for something like a night in the saddle, too. Do you happen to have any idea of where we are at the present moment?"

"Bless your soul, yes! We're within half-a-mile of Lavenham. I shall have to put my poor old gee into the stable there, and you

had better do the same. I daresay Paul will let us have something to drive home in."

He was in such exuberant spirits, and so eager to narrate every episode of a run which had terminated gloriously by a kill in the open, that he took no heed of Miss St George's manifest displeasure. Yet he might have known that nothing in the world is more tedious to listen to than an accurate description of a run in which one has been precluded from participating; and, if my perfunctory "Ohs" and "Ahs" did not convince him of that elementary truth, he was made aware of it, at length, in a more unequivocal manner by the lady, who said—

"Yes; we quite understand that you have had capital fun. I suppose it never occurred to you that a stranger, who didn't happen to be as well mounted as you were, might fail to see the joke of being abandoned to her own devices in a country of which she knew no more than she does of Central Africa."

He then apologised so profusely and earnestly that, by the time that we had reached Lavenham and he had assisted Miss St George to

dismount, his lack of courtesy had been graciously forgiven.

"Only, if you want to show that you are really repentant," said she, "you will send for what clothes you want and stay the night here. I don't doubt for one moment that you would much rather go home; but you admit that you deserve some punishment—and a form of penance which confers some slight benefit upon others ought to be especially welcome to you. Words cannot convey any notion of the dulness of the evenings that I have been spending of late with my aunt and Mr Gascoigne."

It is not impossible that, despite the fascinations of Miss St George, Hurstbourne would have preferred to go home. He was somewhat in awe of his mother, and I think, also, he was not anxious to accept more hospitality than he could from his cousin. But his scruples were vanquished when Mr Gascoigne came out to meet us, and when Miss St George said coolly—

"I have just been telling the Duke and Mr — er — the other gentleman that we can't

turn them out in the cold again at this hour of the night, and that they had better dine and sleep here. There will be time for a groom to go over to Hurstbourne Castle and fetch their things before dinner, won't there?"

I don't know whether it was Paul Gascoigne's polite entreaties or his wry face that prevailed upon Hurstbourne to yield; but I should imagine that, in all probability, it was the latter. He hated Paul Gascoigne so much that I believe he could not resist any chance of fighting him, either with or without the gloves—which was not at all the spirit in which he was accustomed to meet an adversary.

"Oh, rubbish!" said he, when I modestly requested that I might be sent home with the groom; "you must stop and see me through. Besides," he whispered, as we ascended the staircase together, "it's going to be grand sport. That beggar is positively yellow with jealousy."

I said "Take care!" and he answered impatiently that of course he would take care. And of course there was not the slightest chance that he would do any such thing.

CHAPTER XI.

A CONGENIAL PARTY.

DIFFERENT people have different methods of expressing the ire which has to be expressed somehow or other, but which good manners forbid them to put into language. Lady Deverell, when she is angry, lets off steam, so to speak, by blowing her nose loudly, frequently and unnecessarily. Now, on entering the drawing-room at Lavenham, arrayed in the evening garb which had been duly delivered to me just as the dressing-bell rang, I perceived that Lady Deverell was the sole occupant of that vast saloon, and also that she was blowing her nose. It was, therefore, very evident to me that I was going to catch it—and sure enough, I did.

“Your duties,” she began, “don’t appear to be very arduous. May I make so bold as to

ask whether you do anything at all when you are at Hurstbourne Castle?"

I replied that on most days of the week I did a great many things; whereupon she wanted to know what things.

"Well," I said, "the management of the estate is in my hands, and I keep all the accounts."

"Oh, indeed," she returned, with a snort. "The keeping of the accounts must be very interesting and satisfactory work, from all that I hear, and no doubt you give your entire mind to it. Your labours don't seem to prevent you from treating yourself to a whole holiday as often as you like, though."

To attempt to defend oneself against the attack of an irritable old woman is, I take it, a sheer waste of time. Consequently, I made no reply, but listened patiently while I was told, in more or less plain terms, that I was going to the deuce and that Lady Deverell was very glad my poor, dear mother had been spared the spectacle of her son's degradation. But, of course, it was not really

with me that her ladyship was so wrath, and when she had whetted her teeth upon my blameless and defenceless character, she proceeded, as I knew she would, to fall upon her genuine quarry.

"I suppose it would be absurd," she remarked, after she had said every ill-natured thing about Hurstbourne that she could possibly say, "to expect good taste from his mother's son; but I do rather wonder at his having forced poor Mr Gascoigne to put him up for the night when there wasn't the slightest necessity for it. Generous and liberal as Mr Gascoigne is, he can't have much friendly feeling for a man who strained every nerve to keep him out of Parliament, and, political considerations apart, the Duke of Hurstbourne is scarcely the sort of person whom he would have wished to have in his house, if he had been allowed any choice in the matter."

"Liberality and generosity," I replied, "are not always interchangeable terms, and I would not for the world cast a doubt upon the liberality of so staunch a Conservative as

Mr Gascoigne. That he is generous we all know, and I feel sure that, in this instance, his generosity has not been misplaced. Upon my honour as a gentleman, I do not believe that Hurstbourne will pocket the forks and spoons; still, if, as a measure of precaution, Mr Gascoigne would like to have him searched before we leave, I have nothing to urge against it. Only, I hope for the sake of my nose and my front teeth, that I shall not be the person told off to search him."

"My poor young friend," returned Lady Deverell, who, I was glad to see, was highly incensed by my rejoinder, "very few people know how to be clever, and every child knows how to be impertinent. If you can't find anything better than that to say in defence of your friend, I should advise you to hold your tongue."

Well, at all events, I had put this arrogant and religious lady into a rage, and I don't know what more I could have done. I was quite contented with that humble triumph. However, I am free to confess that she might have turned

the tables upon me and put me into a rage if our conversation had not, fortunately, been interrupted by the entrance of our host and Miss St George, who had apparently met outside the door, and who were in the midst of a temperate discussion as to the relative merits of hunting and shooting.

"Of course," Mr Gascoigne was saying, "I admit that one of the obligations imposed upon all landed proprietors is to preserve foxes, and I think that, as a rule, they recognise this. They must give and take; only what we shooting men sometimes venture to complain of is that the hunting men are more ready to take than to give. They are under the impression that everything and everybody ought to yield to them, and we can't altogether share that impression."

"How many times have your coverts been drawn this season?" inquired Miss St George blandly.

"Once only, and that was by invitation. The draw, as you know, resulted in a find. I make no complaint; I merely wonder what the fox-hunters have to complain about. After this,

perhaps, I may be permitted to shoot my own pheasants."

"Then Hurstbourne joined us, and must needs put his oar in. Doubtless he thought his cousin was in the wrong, and doubtless his cousin was in the wrong; but the occasion was hardly a propitious one for saying so, and he got the worst of the argument. Miss St George, who promptly retired from the fray, looked on at it with, as I surmised, the calm and amused indifference of one who was aware that it was being fought upon a false issue. Not on account of foxes or pheasants was Hurstbourne becoming red in the face and Mr Gascoigne frigidly sarcastic; there was quite another bone of contention between them, and the bone knew that as well as I did. Possibly Lady Deverell, who continued to blow her nose noisily in the background, knew it too.

I can't tell whether Miss St George enjoyed herself or not during dinner; very likely she did. But I am quite sure that not one of those who sat at meat with her was happy. We got off the subject of sport, after a time, and attacked

that of politics, which was scarcely a change for the better. Mr Gascoigne chose to identify his guest with his late opponent and to assume that the former professed all the Radical views entertained by the latter. Now, it was a very simple matter to make fun of those views in a quiet, courteous way, and a still simpler matter to point out the absurdity of their being held by a Duke. Poor Hurstbourne made a fool of himself, said several things that he did not mean, had to confess that he had failed to see the logical outcome of his opinions and was finally driven to appeal to one of the weaker sex for support.

"Look here, Miss St George," said he; "I put it to you as a disinterested outsider: Wasn't I justified in expecting that a constituency which had always voted Liberal would go on voting Liberal, even after one of our family had seen fit to turn his coat? Mind you, I'm not saying that this, that, or the other measure ought to be carried; I only ask you whether it wasn't fair to anticipate that the majority of the electors would stick to the old flag?"

Miss St George roused herself from a fit of abstraction to say—

“Well, you see, I don’t quite know what the old flag was. Wasn’t it the Union Jack that Mr Gascoigne kept on waving before their eyes?”

This question, as it may have been intended to do, cast fresh fuel upon the flames, and the altercation which ensued certainly appeared to show that Hurstbourne was one of those unpatriotic citizens who are prepared to lend their aid to the gradual disintegration of the Empire. Yet, though he got the worst of the encounter, he might, if he had cared to do so, have plumed himself upon the achievement of a success somewhat akin to that which I myself had accomplished against Lady Deverell; for he had obviously made his cousin angry. It took a good deal to make Paul Gascoigne angry, and I don’t think that any amount of political heterodoxy on Hurstbourne’s part would have produced that effect upon him. Thus it became rather amusing to watch Miss St George, *arbitra pugnæ*, and to note the im-

partiality with which she alternately soothed and urged on the combatants.

Still, this was not so amusing but that I was sincerely glad to see her and her aunt leave the room. Rows are always to be deprecated, and they are more especially so when one's own side seems likely to come out of them with loss of breath and loss of glory. We cooled down and grew very distant and polite after the ladies had quitted us; nor was it long before we followed them. I don't know what took place then between the rivals and the rather unworthy subject of their rivalry. Whatever Nora may say, I don't believe that Miss St George was a stupid woman, and I have the best of reasons for conjecturing that she spent a pleasant evening. However, I can't uphold my conjecture by any support of personal observation; for no sooner had I entered the drawing-room than I was imperatively beckoned to seat myself beside Lady Deverell, who, it appeared, had not yet done with me.

"You were pleased to rebuke me before

dinner," she began. "You need not apologise for it—"

"I wasn't going to apologise," I interpolated meekly.

"You would have done so if I had given you to understand that I expected it, and you would have been right to do so, because you certainly expressed yourself in an uncalled-for and impertinent manner. But I don't ask you to apologise, nor do I quarrel with you for standing up for your friend. Whether you have chosen your friend wisely time will show; I may be allowed to have my own opinion as to that. But what I was going to say to you when we were interrupted, and what my conscience compels me to say to you now, is that you have made a very great—I fear I might almost call it an irreparable—mistake in permitting your friend to provide a home for your sister. As you know, I was strongly opposed to the arrangement; it was persisted in, notwithstanding my protests, and since I have been here I have heard more than enough to convince me that exactly what I foresaw

has happened. Your sister and the Duke have been seen together at all hours of the day, without even so poor a chaperon as Lady Charles Gascoigne to look after them; people have begun to talk, and I leave you to judge who is likely to be the chief sufferer from such gossip."

This was not pleasant hearing for me; but I forced out a laugh and said the sort of thing which, I suppose, men always do say under similar circumstances. We know—or at any rate most of us do—that gossip is not a thing which any girl can afford to treat with contempt, but we take up high ground when our sisters are attacked, partly because we are infuriated with the malicious women who attack them and partly because we can't see any other dignified attitude to adopt.

"That is all very fine," observed Lady Deverell, when I had finished; "but you must bear in mind that you are not the only person, nor even the principal person, interested in protecting Nora from slander—for I am quite ready to admit that it is probably slander. You owe some

account of your actions, and she owes an account of hers, to Mr Burgess, who would be both grieved and displeased if he were to hear the things that I have heard during the last few days."

"Well, suppose you impart them to him," I replied, subduing a strong inclination to break faith with Nora by announcing that she no longer owed anything at all to Mr Burgess. "Then he will know the worst, and we must endeavour between us to bear the brunt of his grief and displeasure."

Lady Deverell shook her head.

"We are approaching the season of Lent," she remarked. "Have you in your neighbourhood any properly qualified priest to whom Nora can make her confession, as we all ought to do before Ash Wednesday?"

"We are without that privilege," I answered; "we have no priest within hail of Hurstbourne Castle, only an old-fashioned country parson, who who would be frightened out of his five wits if any lady offered to confess her sins to him. Let us trust that Nora has not a great many

sins to avow. If she has, I can't see anything for it but that Mr Burgess should undertake a journey to the north and give or refuse absolution, as may seem expedient to him."

Lady Deverell, whose eyes were at that moment fixed sternly upon the little group at the other end of the room, cannot, I presume, have heard what I said, for she rejoined quite irrelevantly—

"Well it makes no difference to me, because we shall leave the day after to-morrow. Don't say that I didn't warn you, that's all."

I assured her that I would bring no such unjust accusation against her, and, further, that I should not in the least mind if her sense of duty should lead her to convey a warning to Mr Burgess into the bargain. I did not understand at the time why it was that she tried to look indignant, yet could not altogether banish an incipient grin of satisfaction from her hard-featured countenance. Afterwards I realised that she might not be unwilling to do what she could towards promoting a flirtation between the Duke of Hurstbourne and

any woman in the world, save her neice; but I should have been infinitely more clever than I have any pretension to be if I had arrived at that conclusion without feminine aid. How was I to guess that she hated Hurstbourne as only a deeply religious lady can hate, or that his coronet had none of the charms in her eyes which coronets of that exalted description almost invariably possess for her sex? As little could I divine that she was anxious both to wash her hands of responsibility and to obtain a plausible excuse for declaring that I was insanely desirous of placing those strawberry-leaves upon Nora's brow.

END OF VOL. I.







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